

GERRARD'S BLUEPRINT

ADAM THORNTON

GERRARD'S BLUEPRINT

The Tactical Philosophy Behind
Rangers 55th Title Triumph



Contents

First published by Pitch Publishing, 2022



Pitch Publishing
9 Donnington Park,
85 Birdham Road,
Chichester,
West Sussex,
PO20 7AJ
www.pitchpublishing.co.uk
info@pitchpublishing.co.uk

© 2022, Adam Thornton

© 2022, Illustrations by Matthew Wood

Every effort has been made to trace the copyright.
Any oversight will be rectified in future editions at the
earliest opportunity by the publisher.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced,
sold or utilised in any form or transmitted in any form or by
any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,
recording or by any information storage and retrieval system,
without prior permission in writing from the Publisher.

A CIP catalogue record is available for this book
from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 80150 057 9

Typesetting and origination by Pitch Publishing
Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Pvt. Ltd.

Introduction	7
1. Tactical Philosophy	11
Tactical Influences	13
The Management Team	20
Setting the Tactical Vision	32
Out of Possession – Own the Pitch	37
In Possession – Own the Ball	48
Mentality and Character	61
2. Formation Evolution	69
4-3-2-1 Origins	67
Hibs 5 Rangers 5, 13 May 2018	82
2018 Squad Overview	89
2019 Squad Overview	101
COVID	113
2020 Squad Overview	118
3. Player and Tactical Role Evolution	131
Goalkeeper	133
Centre-Backs	137
Full-Back Playmakers	153
The Number Six	170
Flat Midfield Three	179
Free Eights	189
Twin Tens	205
Hybrid Attackers	222
Alfredo Morelos Evolution	239
Signature Goals	252
2021/22	265
Epilogue	267
Bibliography	268

Signature Goals

It's often said that certain teams score goals that sum up their playing philosophy so perfectly that they could be classed as their 'signature goals'. In my head, this usually takes me back to Barcelona under Pep Guardiola and the way Xavi and Iniesta would combine almost telepathically, searching for the split-second weakness in a team's defensive structure that would allow them to slip a perfectly weighted pass through to Messi to invariably score and invariably on his left foot.

Or maybe, to use a more recent example of a Guardiola team, Manchester City. How many times did we see City open teams up using combinations on the right wing which resulted in a low cross flashed across goal for Raheem Sterling to slide the ball into an empty net? Or the full-back to full-back combinations at Liverpool between Andy Robertson and Trent-Alexander Arnold?

Throughout this book I have attempted to illustrate what I feel are the important tactical and philosophical details that produced Rangers' success during Gerrard's three full seasons in charge. It will come as no surprise to anyone that when a coaching staff look to implement such a highly structured, well-coached tactical set-up there is a huge amount of work done on the training pitch working on every forensic detail. These goals are borne from constant repetition of patterns of play to achieve as close to perfection on the football pitch as is humanly possible.

With that in mind, it's only natural that a Rangers team that could be so well identified by its 4-3-2-1 formation on

Figure 54

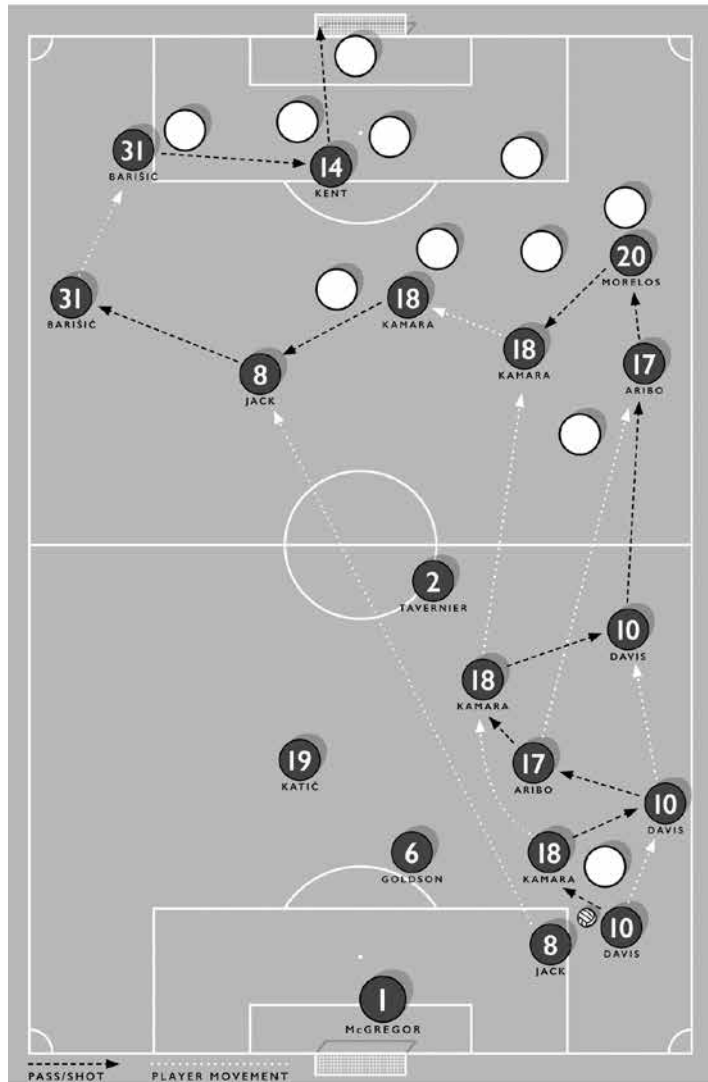
As outlined in earlier chapters, a key aim of Rangers' attacking play was focused on building up attacks through the right-hand side of the pitch before switching play quickly to Borna Barišić to allow him to deliver into the box. This goal is one of the best examples of this and not only did it come in one of the biggest domestic games of the 2019/20 season, it helped to deliver Rangers' first victory at Parkhead in ten years, another key step in the journey back to the top of Scottish football.

In the 36th minute of the first half and with the score at 0-0, Rangers won the ball back deep in their own right-back area of the pitch through a combination of Ryan Jack and Steven Davis. The latter showcased all of his skills in possession to initiate a series of quick passes between himself, Joe Aribo and Glen Kamara which not only saw Rangers break through Celtic's line of counter-pressure, but enabled Aribo to find Alfredo Morelos on the right side of the attack. The Colombian had successfully managed to isolate Celtic centre-back Christopher Jullien and – with the aid of a deflection – was able to find Kamara in a central position. Kamara did what he does best and moved the ball quickly and efficiently across pitch while dragging Celtic players out of their defensive line as the overload began to take shape. Jack received the pass and played a quick one touch pass to Barišić who had been left in ten yards of space due to Celtic's defence being pulled to the opposite side of the park.

Barišić's improved cross variation is again evident here as the expectation is that he would attempt to hit the byline and

SIGNATURE GOAL – THE OVERLOAD

Celtic 1-2 Rangers SPFL 29.12.19



Rangers would regularly build attacks down their right-hand side before switching quickly to the opposite flank to make use of Borna Barisic's crossing ability.

FIGURE 54

cross into the box. With the aid of a stepover, he was able to disguise a pull-back to the centre of the box and an unmarked Kent who delivered an outstanding one-touch left-footed finish to give Rangers a 1-0 lead. Rangers' ability to move the ball at speed was a key factor in this goal, but the movement of players such as Aribo and Kamara to drag opposition defenders into non-threatening areas was just as vital as this created the opportunity to overload and gave Kent the freedom required to score.

Figure 55

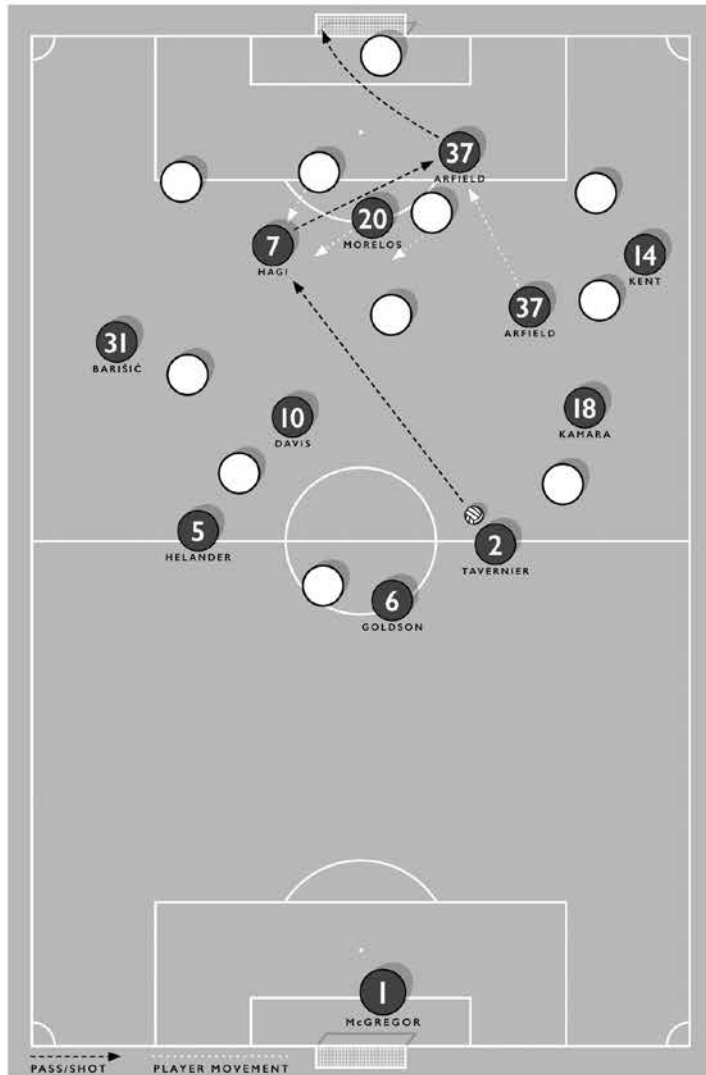
There were some incredibly crucial European goals throughout Steven Gerrard's management, but none more so than the goals that delivered Rangers' safe passage into the group stage of the Europa League thus giving the club the financial platform to recruit players of significant quality to move on to the next level. First, there was Ovie Ejaria's lovely finish in Russia against FC Ufa in August 2018. In 2019, a stunning injury-time header from Alfredo Morelos was enough to progress past Legia Warsaw at Ibrox.

The most impressive victory in qualifying, however, was saved for the title-winning season with Rangers defeating Turkish giants Galatasaray 2-1 in a one-legged qualifying round. Given the magnitude of the game, you would struggle to find two more aesthetically pleasing goals with the first scored by Scott Arfield and the second by James Tavernier. Tavernier's goal is another example of Rangers' overload on the left and has been covered in great detail earlier in this book. Arfield's showcased how Rangers again utilised the 'third man run' tactical concept to great effect.

Tavernier picked the ball up in the right half-space and played a quick entry pass into the feet of Morelos, who had dropped into space. By doing so, Morelos was looking to receive the pass, but he also dragged Galatasaray's Brazilian centre-back Marcão out of the defensive line. Morelos dummied this

SIGNATURE GOAL – THE THIRD MAN RUN

Rangers 2-1 Galatasaray Europa League 01.10.20



Scott Arfield and Ianis Hagi would combine several times in the early months of season 2020/21 using the third man run concept, including this opening goal against Galatasaray at Ibrox.

FIGURE 55

pass, allowing it to run through to Ianis Hagi, who displayed his excellent vision and passing by taking one touch, then threading a pass into the space left by Marcão into which Arfield had run. As the move happened so quickly, the Galatasaray left-back Martin Linnes was unable to tuck in to cover this run and Arfield was able to break into the box and score with the outside of his right foot.

Just five touches between three players and Rangers had sliced Galatasaray open with a wonderful goal that sent them on their way to a crucial victory and the Europa League group stages for the third year running.