

Villa @ Southampton: The goals against

In this post I want to address the goals we conceded, I think they were all poorly defended, and preventable. I think our captain had a very poor game, and was dominated by Lambert (who played a huge role in every goal). Vlaar and the defence certainly weren't helped by our midfield, but Vlaar could have prevented Lambert having as much influence as he did.

I have included some images from the four goals conceded to help me highlight various things, you may have to scroll through and back as you read the post, hopefully it's not too much trouble.

1-1 Lamberts goal

Lichaj has just charged forward with the ball, but got outnumbered and lost the ball, **Fig 1.1** shows Lichaj (blue circle) trying to regain possession, out of shot, Bannan has dropped in at left back covering for Lichaj. Holman has Puncheon marked against the far touchline (claret circle.) **Fig 1.2** shows Lichaj (blue circle), with the help of Bent and Benteke, forcing Southampton into a rushed clearance, just out of shot, Westwood is moving forward to close Schneiderlin, should Soton's back 4 find the DM. Southampton's clearance has passed Schneiderlin and Westwood in **Fig 1.3**, El Ahmadi, who had been moved to the right of the diamond, is seen tracking across the pitch (blue line). Meanwhile Holman has let Puncheon free (claret circle), and Puncheon is charging forwards (red line), in support of Lallana and Lambert.

Fig 1.1



Fig 1.2



Fig 1.3



Lallana collects the ball unopposed in the centre circle, as Westwood is high up the pitch, Bannan is filling in at left back, and El Ahmadi is on the right. Lallana then moves out to target Bannan (**Fig 1.4**), with Puncheon offering support by darting inside, El Ahmadi (blue line) has continued to rush across the pitch to support Bannan who had faced both Puncheon and Lallana. Bannan has done well to hold Lallana up, Westwood and El Ahmadi are back in support able to watch midfield runners; in the box, Lambert is marked by 3 Villa defenders. Lallana gets the ball to Lambert, Bannan could have probably done better to prevent the cross, but in **Fig 1.5** we see Lambert is still faced with 3 Villa defenders (blue line), Vlaar (marked by a claret dash above his head), has stepped out, Lowton is moving toward the ball and Lambert. Puncheon (red circle) is now a danger for Clark to worry about, Lambert could easily lay it off to Puncheon. **Fig 1.6** shows Lowton continue to apply good pressure to Lambert (shown by blue line), however Vlaar

(claret dash) has not moved to cut off Lambert who has taken one touch. Lambert shifts it again, Vlaar is rooted, Clark tries to step in, but arrives too late.

Fig 1.4



Fig 1.5



Fig 1.6



2-1 Clynes goal

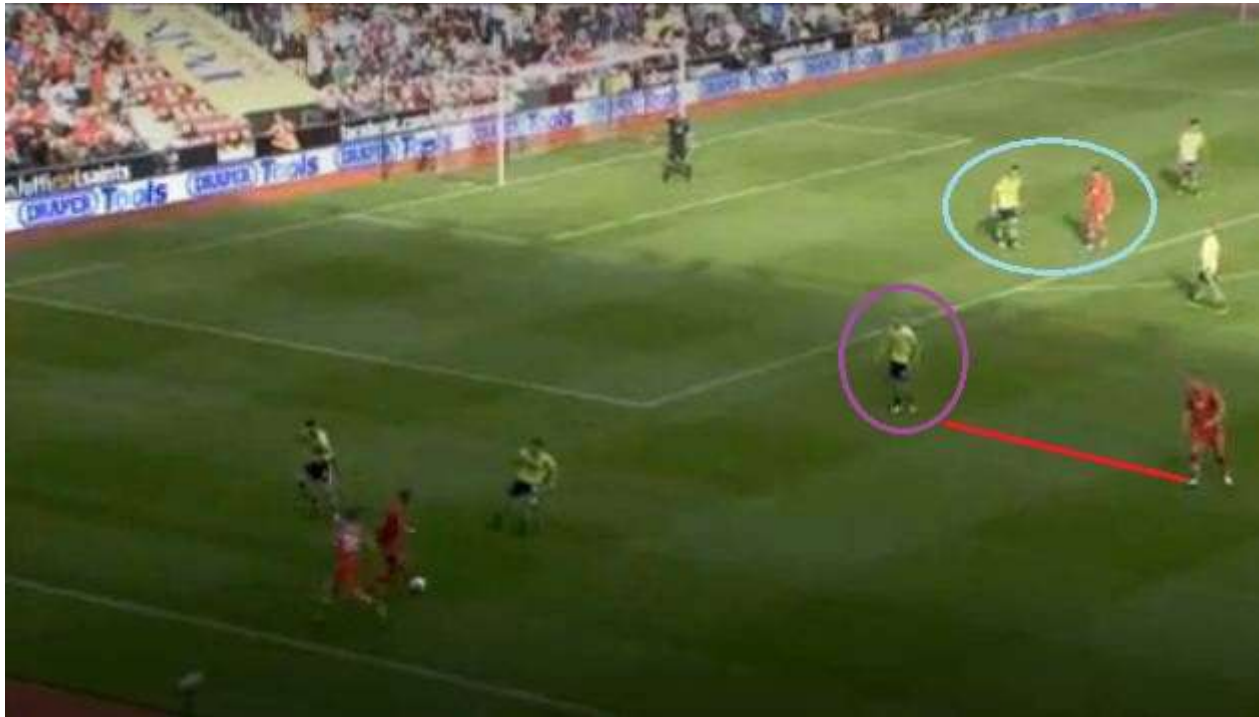
This was a very good Southampton move, but again some very simple mistakes by a number of players. **Fig 2.1** shows little danger, Clark has Ramirez marked (blue circle), Vlaar has Lambert marked (claret circle), and Lallana carries the ball wide towards Clyne, drawing Westwood with him.

Fig 2.1



Moving on to **Fig 2.2**, Clyne has taken over from Lallana who goes on the overlap, Westwood and Lowton should communicate who to track. In the centre, Clark still has Ramirez marked (blue circle), but he must be aware of the gap vacated by Vlaar. Vlaar however is caught in no-man's-land, he has let Lambert get space, but still there is time to prevent what comes next.

Fig 2.2



Clyne has begun his run inside (red line) in **Fig 2.3**, Westwood (blue star) is the wrong side, but is probably expecting there to be a centre back occupying the space Clyne is running into. Clark (blue circle) lets Ramirez go as the space left by Vlaar is too big and he must cover, should Lambert slide Clyne in. Vlaar (claret circle) still hasn't got as tight to Lambert as he could, and this allows Lambert the time to wait for Ramirez to make himself available (the shorter red line.)

Fig 2.3



Fig 2.4 and Westwood (blue star) is now goal side of Clyne, however the threat remains, and Westwood doesn't show the urgency required, he will need to learn from this. Bannan and El Ahmadi are closing on Ramirez, as is Clark who then gets caught out, Ramirez flicks the ball round the corner and Clyne is clean through, **Fig 2.5**, Westwood appeals in vain.

Fig 2.4



Fig 2.5



3-1 Punccheon's goal

Southampton's keeper starts the move for their third, **Fig 3.1**, Bent closes Gazzaniga quickly and forces a long ball. Moments later, in **Fig 3.2** (note the invisible midfield, all too easy for Soton), Lowton (claret circle) has just lost the header from Gazzaniga's clearance, the ball falls to Lallana, and Vlaar (yellow star), moves to meet Lallana who plays a simple ball into the channel vacated by first Lowton, and then Vlaar.

Fig 3.1



Fig 3.2



Vlaar should have maybe stayed and watched the space in behind, instead, he creates even more room for Lambert to run into (red line). But it's okay, Vlaar recovers and gets back, **Fig 3.3**, Clark holds a good position, however he has a problem, Lallana and Puncheon (seen in 3.2 on the far side near Villa's left back), have crossed their runs; does he track Puncheon to the near post or maintain position to cut out the potential cross to Lallana? **Fig 3.4** shows Clark's dilemma, but Lowton (blue circle) can be seen recovering and capable of getting back to help mark Puncheon.

Fig 3.3

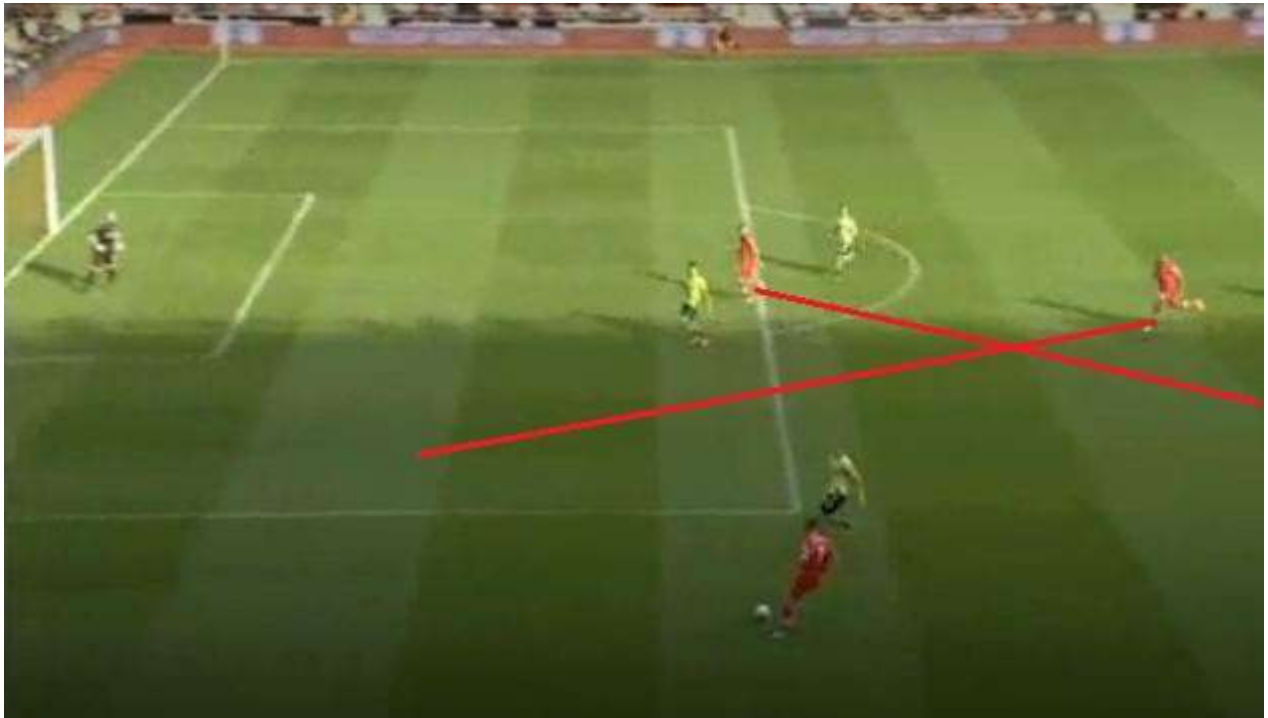
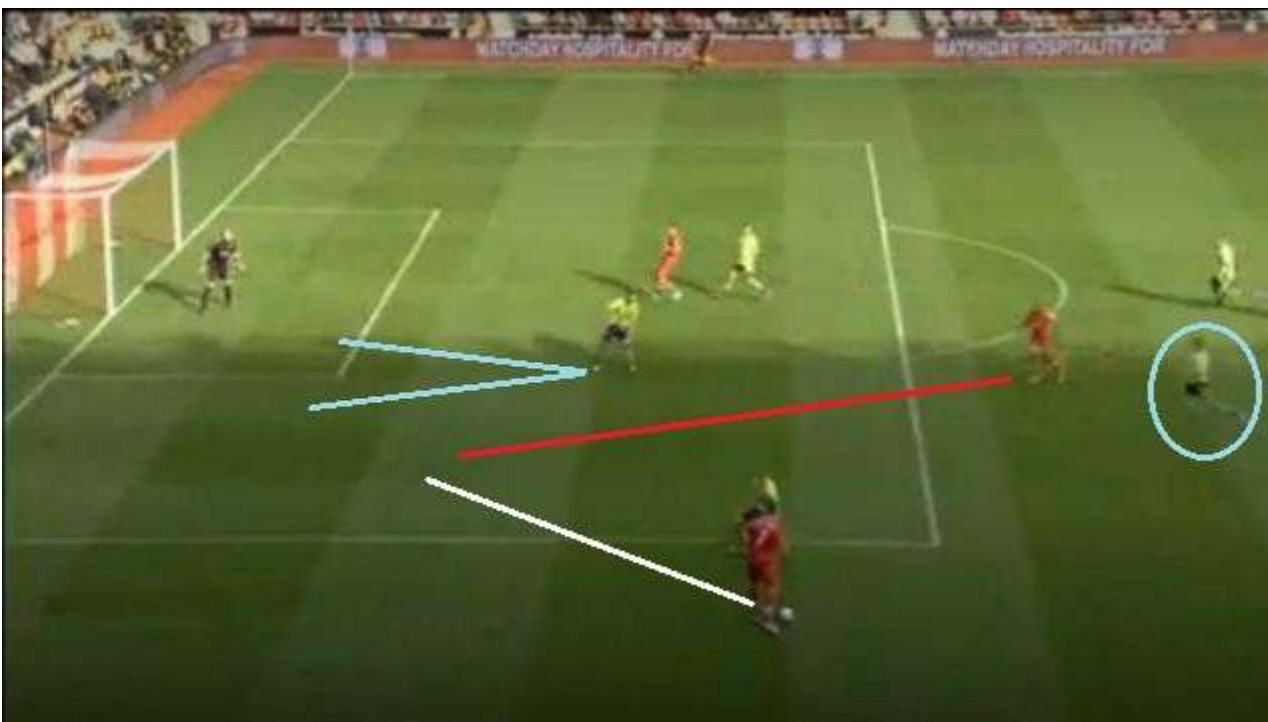


Fig 3.4



It's Vlaar's position that causes most problems, he is once again giving Lambert far too much space and time (**Fig 3.4a**), and this allows Punccheon to make the strides into the space, and Lambert to play the simple pass (white line in **Fig 3.4.**) Lambert has played the easy pass in **Fig 3.5**, Lowton (blue circle) has recovered though, and whilst it's dangerous, it should be snuffed out, but Lowton lunges in, allowing Punccheon past, who fires a shot against Clark, and past Guzan.

Fig 3.4a

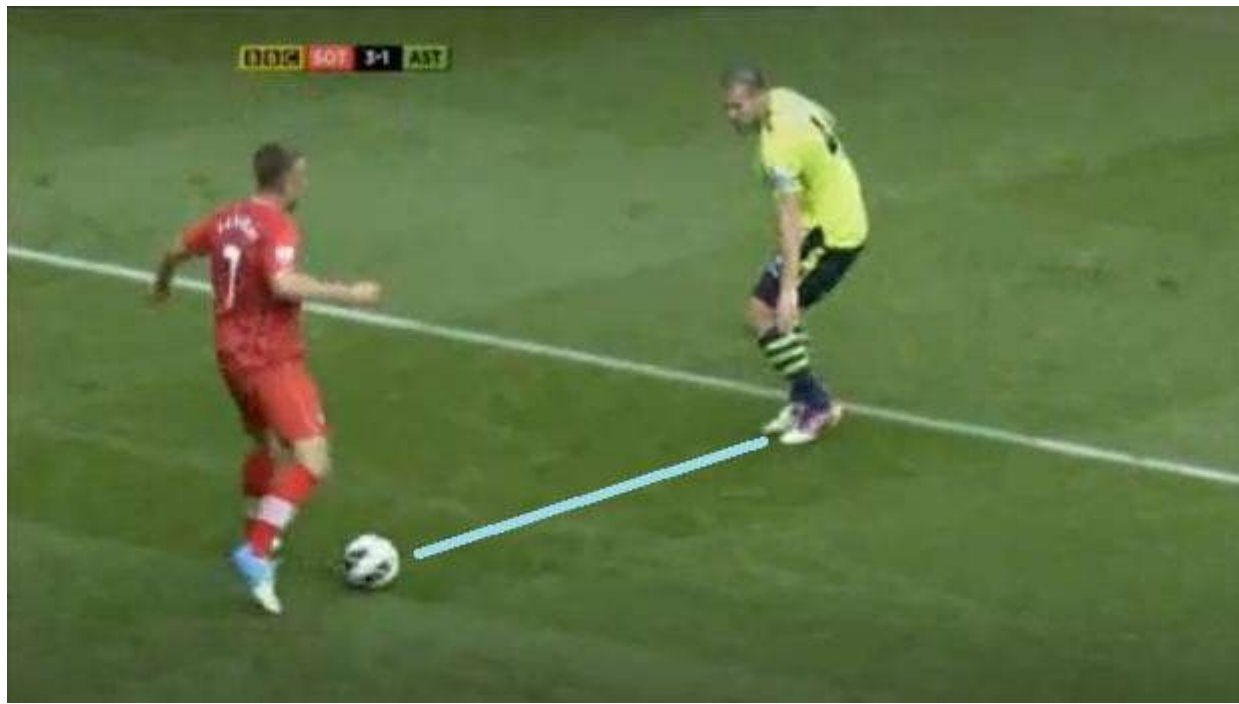


Fig 3.5



4-1 Penalty incident

This summed up the day for me, a long ball up the pitch from Soton, **Fig 4.1**, Vlaar is initially tight to Lambert, neither really win the header and the ball falls between them. Puncheon is looking (red line) to get in behind Clark. Puncheon flattens his run in **Fig 4.2** making Clark (yellow star) plant his feet, the best defenders in the world are caught by such moves, but it can be nullified if there is pressure on the passer. Vlaar did not apply pressure to Lambert throughout the game, it was the same here, Lambert had time to compose himself and loft the pass. If you flick through the images, 4.1 thru **Fig 4.3** you will see via the mower lines that Vlaar drops off and hands the initiative to Lambert, and this leaves Clark exposed. Lambert plays the pass in 4.3, and Puncheon is through on goal.

Fig 4.1



Fig 4.2

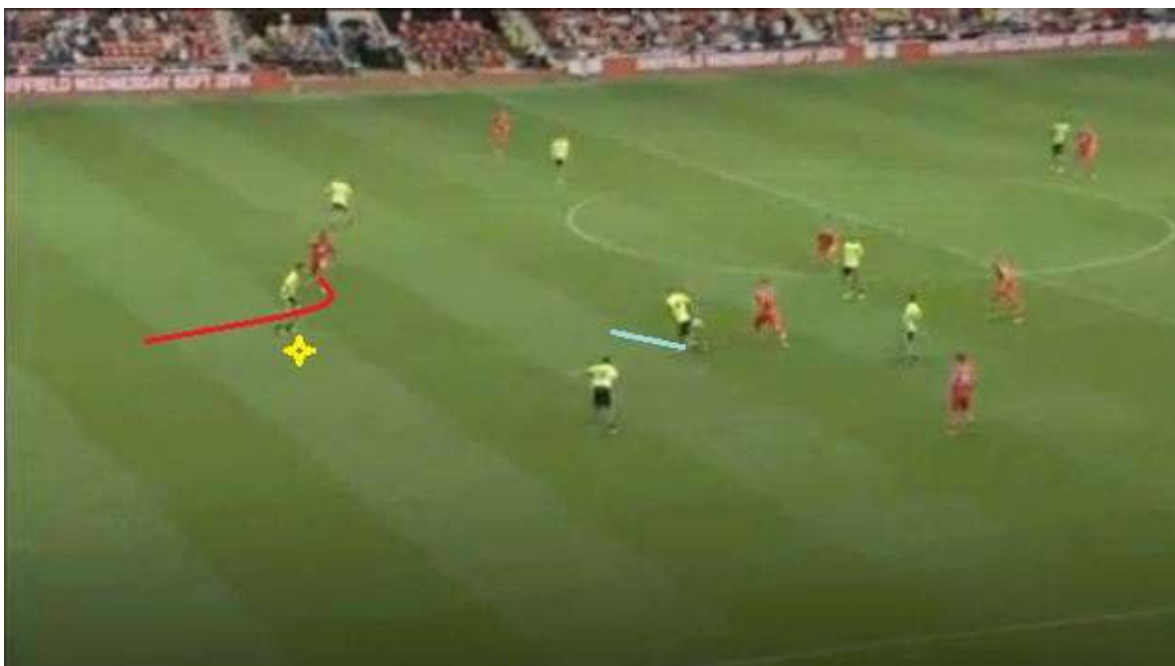


Fig 4.3



Summary

In the build up to all four goals, Vlaar was guilty of standing off Lambert, who he was man-marking. This meant Clark was having to watch for the runs of Puncheon and Lallana, however, the midfield should also be tracking those runs to support the defence, and protect them from being overloaded, this did not happen. Holman allowed Puncheon free for Lambert's goal, and this caused a problem for Clark, had Holman tracked Puncheon Clark could have closed Lambert earlier; although any challenge Clark would need to make should have been last resort, Vlaar was far too slow to react. For Soton's 2nd goal, Westwood had lost Clyne, then found him, then let him go again, but the huge gap at the heart of the defence was also an issue. Similarly for Soton's 3rd goal, noone from midfield was tracking Lallana or Puncheon, and it left Clark in a tricky spot, Lowton recovered only to panic, and WHAP, game over.

This was a performance to forget, three 'young' inexperienced defenders were left exposed, our experienced captain didn't offer much by way of leadership, and caused more trouble by not getting tight to Lambert. However, the back 4 were not supported by the players in front of them, the midfielders. It may also have been wise to have our captain, the most experienced CB, stay at the heart of the defence to help organise, rather than to man mark Lambert, which he did poorly, but given the absence of our midfield, even in the first half, I'm not sure Vlaar staying back to help organise would have made much difference at all.

Aston Villa @ Southampton

It was not good. Villa went down 4-1 to newly promoted, bottom of the pile, Southampton; their lowly position was likely false due to playing last season's top3 in their first 4, as they had shown signs against the two Manchester clubs that they were more than capable of mounting a serious threat to Villa.

At no point during this game did Villa have control; even the 1-0 score-line at HT was probably flattering. Villa had just 40% of possession, completing just 66% of their passes, very similar stats to last weeks win against Swansea (42% possession, 69% pass accuracy), only last week Villa were more productive with the ball and enjoyed possession higher up the pitch. The pressing and positioning against Swansea was far more efficient and effective, especially from Villa's midfield, and attackers.

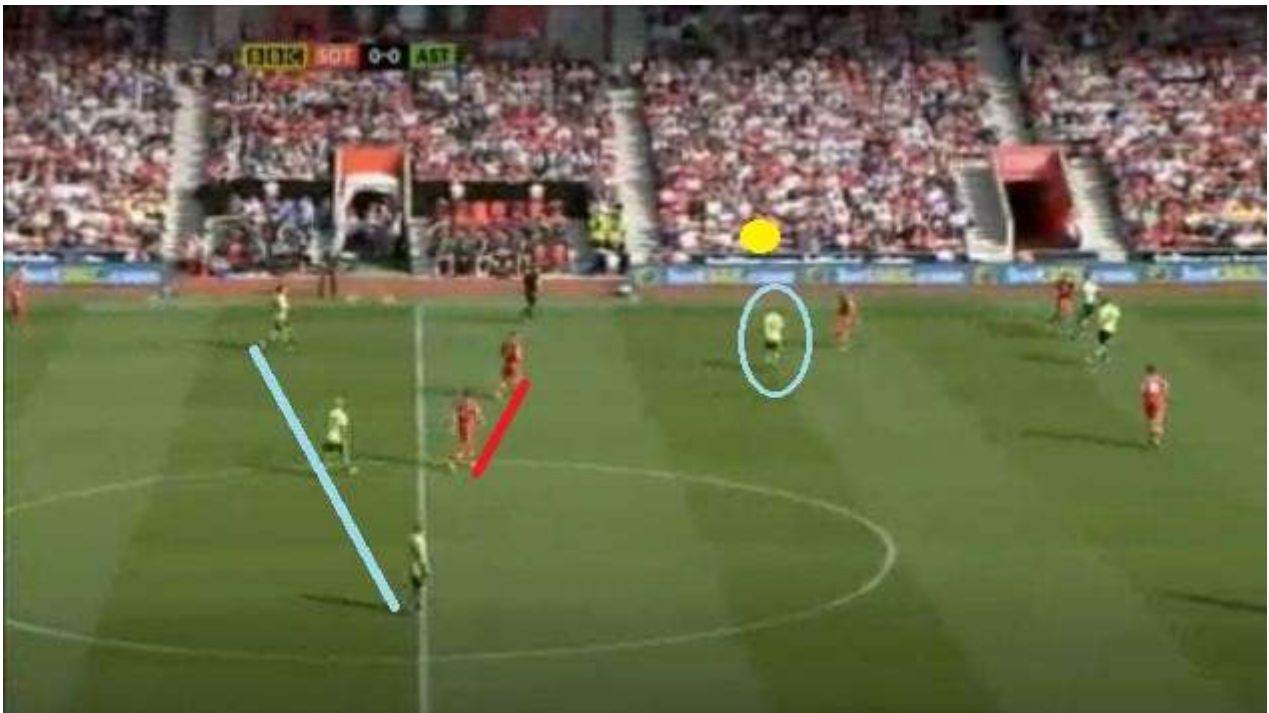
Without the Ball

The images below highlights two separate occasions of an invisible midfield, that piled pressure on the back 4, who did not handle it all too well.

The first example concerns the **5.1** thru **5.3**, it occurred after a Soton goal kick in the 19th minute, so even early in the game it was clear that Villa's midfield was far too open .

In **Fig 5.1**, the ball (approximately marked by yellow dot against crowd) is dropping to an unmarked Lambert on the left. Villa's forward midfield 3 (of Bannan, Ireland and Holman, highlighted by blue line) are all the wrong side of the two deepest Soton midfielders (red line).

Fig 5.1

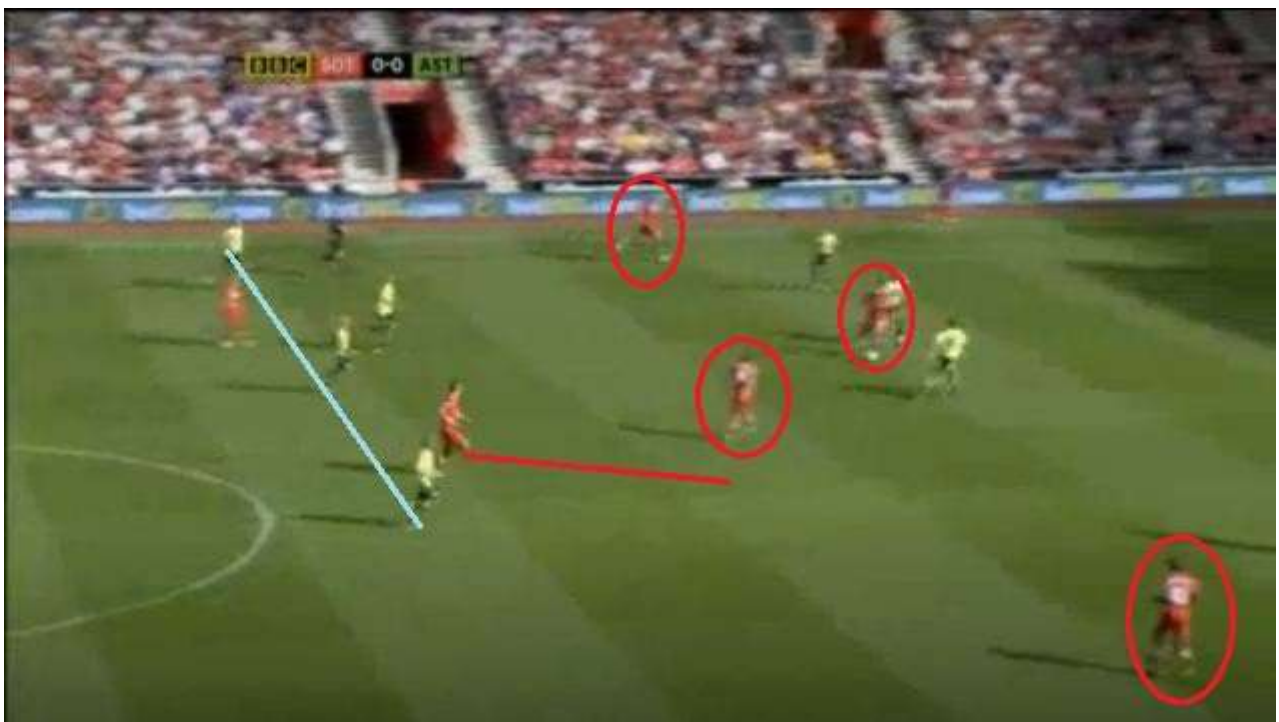


El Ahmadi (blue circle) tries to close Lambert down, but he is stretched and it's all too easy for Lambert to lay the ball to Davis who strides forward, with Schneiderlin in tow, shown in **Fig 5.2**. Davis plays the ball forward to Lallana and Soton now have 5 breaking on Villa's back 4 without having to work hard (**Fig 5.3**), it results in Ramirez taking a shot that drifts harmlessly wide. Villa were very lucky, but the warnings were there early in the game, but the midfield would remain as open throughout the game.

Fig 5.2



Fig 5.3



El Ahmadi tried manfully at the base of a diamond up until half-time, when Westwood replaced Ireland and dropped into that deep role, with El Ahmadi moving right, and Holman moving to Ireland's role. Neither El Ahmadi or Westwood had good games, but neither were supported by their fellow midfielders, or forwards. As the example above shows, El Ahmadi was having to marshall far too much space. Holman, who had been so energetic in the last two games, driving Villa to aggressive pressing, was less so on Saturday, and Villa struggled to press as a team as a result.

The front 2 of Bent and Benteke also failed to apply enough pressure, or drop deep to support our midfield diamond against Southampton's midfield 5. Perhaps Bent and Benteke hadn't quite built up an understanding of who did what, when we didn't have the ball.

The next series of images comes when Soton were leading 3-1, so Villa were possibly chasing the game, but it again highlights the poor positioning and support of the midfield; even so the defence then made poor decisions, which Southampton failed to capitalise on.

It begins in **Fig 6.1**, Gabby had just pressed Maya Yoshida to play the ball wide to Clyne (white line), who had a huge second half against Lowton and Vlaar (who were both below par.) It also shows the movement (red line) by Schneiderlin(?) who is going to move behind Bent, who is looking to apply pressure to Clyne (the ball Clyne will play to Schneiderlin is also included.) Moving on to **Fig 6.2** we can see the three Villa midfielders (highlighted with yellow stars - not gold stars!!) are nowhere to be seen, and are unable to apply pressure to Soton's midfielders.

Meanwhile Lallana is moving toward the ball (short red line) and Lowton (blue circle) is beginning to track, the back 4 is pretty well organised, if a little exposed (due to no midfield), at the minute there is no real danger, however it soon becomes clear where the danger will emerge.

Fig 6.1



Fig 6.2



Again we see Villa's midfield in **Fig 6.3** (yellow stars), but now we see that Lallana has turned and looking to run in behind (red line) Lowton. Vlaar has an easy decision to make; track Lallana's run. Lowton is over-committed and will be closing Schneiderlin, so Vlaar must follow the runner (as shown in **Fig 6.3a**).

Fig 6.3



Fig 6.3a



Instead he looks to intercept the pass shown in **Fig 6.4**, in **Fig 6.4a** Lowton is caught out, but Vlaar continues to chase the ball rather than track the clear danger, Lallana. Lallana breaks through, Puncheon supports from the right, marked loosely by Bennett, Clyne has over-taken Westwood and is up in support of attack, its 3 vs 2 in Soton's favour, Clark gets a good tackle, **Fig 6.5**, in and the ball goes out for a throw in.

Fig 6.4



Fig 6.4a



Fig 6.5



With the Ball

As mentioned earlier, Villa completed just 66% of their passes, 2 players (Bent and Benteke) completed fewer of their passes than Brad Guzan, who hit 24 long balls. Matt Lowton and Barry Bannan were both poor in possession completing just 63% of their passes. Both Bannan and Vlaar were guilty of long balls, although no more than they were last week, so to castigate them this would be a tad unfair given they both received praise, however Bannan especially should be doing more with the ball.

Villa definitely looked longer in the game against Soton, however this increase was largely down to Guzan, who possibly looked to find Benteke quickly, which he did, Benteke won 11 headers (some came from corners). 21% of Villa's total passes were long balls against Soton; Guzan, with 25 long balls, was responsible for 33% of the total long balls. A week earlier, against Swansea, 15% of Villa's passes were long balls, Guzan with 12 long balls was responsible for 22% of all long balls. Against Swansea, it's perhaps worth noting that Guzan looked early when Benteke came on, and one such ball led to Benteke's debut goal. The defence were maybe forced into playing it back to Guzan regularly, then Guzan clearing, as the midfield was completely absent.

But Guzan was not the only culprit, the outfield players were still giving the ball away cheaply with long balls, but with a midfield diamond against Soton's 5, and with Bent and Benteke rarely coming short to collect a pass, players possibly struggled to create and find space, and so passes had to be forced; it was a similar problem that Villa faced against Everton, who were also able to outnumber Villa easily and forcing mistakes.

There were very few positives from this game, one great pass by Benteke to Bent was about it, that's about it, ha, the positives really were thin on the ground. Sorry for not looking at what Villa did with the ball, there wasn't much to get excited by, and the more telling story of the game was Villa's defensive mistakes from our captain, and the lack of midfield cohesion.

Changes?

It's becoming clear that we cannot afford to have two men up top and play a midfield diamond, unless the front two are going to drop into midfield when we lose the ball. We need numbers and options in midfield, this can help with possession (as long as players move) and add a bit more control and stability. A five man midfield can also protect the defence a little more, and can facilitate the more aggressive pressing we saw vs Swansea; Delph, who is better on the ball than Herd would be my choice, Westwood should continue to make subs appearances until he is up to speed. This extra man in midfield does mean sacrificing one of the forwards, but against Soton neither Bent or Benteke dropped deep to support the midfield, so it is a must, unless they change and perform similarly to the Weimann and Bent partnership. Weimann and Bent both they took turns dropping into midfield to add numbers in attack to receive the ball, and in defence to help with the more aggressive pressing.

The problem that faces Lambert, is that we are possibly strongest in attacking areas, with options like Bent, Benteke, Gabby and Weimann, and with N'Zogbia also lacking in defensive ability (or will.) A balance needs to be struck between stability in the middle of the pitch whilst maintaining attacking numbers and options, this should come with understanding, players will still be learning about each other. Against Swansea we showed we can press and attack as a team, although that performance also lacked quality and composure when we had the ball for large periods, but Lambert is still searching for the right balance; and it could take some time yet. In the meantime, we need to return to the effort and endeavour that we showed against Swansea and Newcastle, if we are lacking in quality then we must make up for it in effort, this is something that Holman typified against both those opponents.