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Colombia vs. Argentina Copa America 2015 Analysis: Why Jose Pekerman Must Drop Falcao

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A year ago Colombia was the toast of the FIFA World Cup. The team, led by James Rodriguez, was a swashbuckling crew that attacked with direction, pace and pizzazz.

Fast-forward one year and said pace, direction and pizzazz are non-entities. The opening half against Brazil withstanding, the Colombia of the Copa America looks like a shadow of the team that so impressed the world in 2014.

There are things to marvel at in this iteration of Colombia. The team is the best at shot prevention, allowing just 7.3 shots per game thus far in the tournament, by far the fewest in Chile. Colombia also leads the way in interceptions per game with 14.7 and is third in the tournament in tackles per game.

However, the attack is not in the upper echelon in creating chances, generating around 15 shots per game but only getting two on target.

What happened to the dazzling Colombia of 2014?

#### **Why Colombia dominated in 2014**

That Colombia was centered on James Rodriguez being the creative force. He scored six goals and two assists as Colombia made a magical run to the quarterfinals. During that run, Rodriguez played in his natural position as a central attacking midfielder behind the team's central striker. He had the freedom to roam around the middle of the pitch and feed balls up the wings and through for the attack. He was also able to put himself in spots to create his own chances and score big goals.

He also had no responsibility of tracking back to defend as Colombia played a tactical 4-2-3-1 with Carlos Sanchez and Abel Aguilar providing him with stability at the back. Coach Jose Pekerman played this tactic in the two

opening group games before trying out a 4-1-4-1 against Japan and a 4-4-2 against Uruguay. In the Japan encounter, Colombia languished until Rodriguez entered the fray thrusting the team back into the formation that had made the club so strong in its opening two games.

The 4-4-2 against Uruguay worked mainly because Rodriguez and company relied on a more insular approach against a Uruguay that would look to counter. Playing with two speedy strikers allowed Colombia more options for unlocking Uruguay but it also risked the team's attack if Uruguay's 5-3-2 managed to cut down the offense. Rodriguez remained central despite starting on the wing and Colombia ultimately seized the day before reverting into a 4-4-2 on defense.

It was a team that had creativity in its formation but a great deal of balance. The 4-4-2 worked because Jackson Martinez and Teofilo Gutierrez both have speed and skill, thus allowing Rodriguez and Cuadrado support in the middle and allowing them to play in wider positions. The 4-2-3-1 was tremendously balanced and allowed Rodriguez to do what he does best - attack.

## So what is going wrong in 2015?

In each of the Copa America games, Pekerman has opted for a 4-2-2-2 so that he can incorporate captain Radamel Falcao into the squad. Falcao is not a mobile forward, playing best with his back to goal and providing strong hold up play, an aerial presence and good poaching abilities inside the box. At least that was the Falcao of 2011-13.

The Falcao of 2015 is slow (he has always been slow), lacks precision on his first touch, lacks confidence from diminished playing time on his club and is no longer the physical presence he was prior to suffering his knee injury in 2014.

His presence on the team hurts not only because his form makes him a liability (Colombia winds up playing with just 10 players instead of 11) and his star status seems to make other players feel as if they need to feed him the ball.

Moreover, it forces Colombia into a 4-2-2-2 that hurts Rodriguez and Juan Cuadrado. Because Falcao is not mobile or even the best of passers and dribblers, he requires a good strike partner to feed him the ball (hence why he is not useful in a 4-2-3-1). Without that support system, El Tigre essentially cannot do much for himself. In the current form he finds himself even that is not enough as Falcao has no goals in three games and has a grand total of seven shots on goal and only one on target.

Because he relies on a support system, Rodriguez and Cuadrado are forced to play more centrally, thus cutting off Colombia's ability to create on the wings. They are also expected to track back defensively to provide support to the fullbacks when the opposition attack. Rodriguez has improved as a defender at Real Madrid, but he is far from a strong one and is best served when he has no defensive responsibilities.

Fullbacks Pablo Armero and Santiago Arias (Camilo Zuniga was a defensive liability in the first two group games) have looked solid pushing up on the attack, but the thinning of Colombia's overall attack has made it simple for organized defenses to shut it down. For Peru and Venezuela it has been a matter of clogging the center of the pitch, cutting down Rodriguez's space and his ability to create.

Falcao's lack of mobility means that Rodriguez only has two outlets in the offensive third instead of the three he had in the 4-2-3-1 and 4-4-2. How has he tried to link up with Falcao in this tournament? Via long balls, hoping that the former Manchester United man, wins position and gets a shot at the goal. It has yet to work.

Work with Teofilo Gutierrez has been far more impressive and everyone saw how Colombia's attack woke up against Brazil and Peru once Falcao came off.

While Colombia attacked beautifully against Brazil in the first half, the team could not string passes together against Brazil in the second half. Once Falcao left, Victor Ibarbo essentially eliminated the second striker returning Colombia to a 4-2-3-1. Unsurprisingly Rodriguez showed the flash of genius that made him such a star in 2014, dribbling around Brazil's defense and nearly scoring a wonder goal.

Against Peru Pekerman made odd substitutions, forcing Cuadrado back to defend while adding Ibarbo and bringing

on Jackson Martinez to play up top with Teofilo. Rodriguez became more central in this formation and now had two mobile forwards with whom to link up. Again Colombia created three scoring opportunities through the counter that had not been possible with Falcao on the pitch.

## Speed

While the topic of the counter remains, here is one vital piece of information. Colombia was not dominating possession during its World Cup exploits. In its four victories, Los Cafeteros managed an average possession of 44.8; their best run of possession came in the game against the Ivory Coast when the team owned the ball [49 percent of the time](#).

Why was Colombia so effective without the ball? Because the team attacked quickly on the counter, linking up beautifully throughout the midfield with its speedy cast.

Falcao is not a quick player and has never been one. Playing him in a system that requires speed is simply not going to help the team thrive. Colombia has dominated possession in two of three encounters in the Copa America; guess which one was the one in which it lacked it? Against Brazil Colombia had possession just 42.6 percent of the time but looked lethal with speed on the counter.

Against Peru and Venezuela it became a matter of clogging up the space and forcing Colombia to the outside where it had few options. In both games Colombia came away with a goose egg on the scoreboard.

## So what happens next?

Colombia is lucky to have another chance, though hardly through the team's own prowess. Argentina presents an interesting challenge, but it might actually work into the team's hands if (a big if) Pekerman learns from his mistakes.

First of all he needs to cut ties with Falcao. The man is the captain and nation's leading scorer, but he is not the dominant force that put Colombia into the World Cup. His lack of precision is hurting the team because without it he has little else to contribute.

Secondly, Pekerman needs to move back into a 4-2-3-1 formation. The absence of Carlos Sanchez and Edwin Valencia may make him more reticent to stick with this formation and he might look to keep the insular 4-2-2-2 that protects the middle of the park, but he needs to go into his reserves and put someone with Alexander Mejia to provide cover against Messi and company. This will allow Rodriguez to play his attacking position behind either Gutierrez or Martinez and also free up Cuadrado. This also means that Ibarbo starts and few would complain of the way in which the muscular winger has comported himself thus far in Chile. He is fast, strong, and great with the holdup play on the wing.

Falcao of course is where the conversation starts and ends. It might be hard for Pekerman to drop his captain but this is the decision that could change of the course of the tournament for Colombia, bringing back the swagger of last year in exchange for the confused and broken tactics of the past week.

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