

Beyond Physical Readiness:

Who Is Driving Spain's Attack Ahead of the 2026 World Cup?

When people talk about Spain, the conversation usually starts with possession.

Lots of passes. Lots of control. Lots of technical quality.

But possession itself is not the objective. The objective is moving the ball through the pitch and arriving in dangerous areas.

That was one of the most interesting findings from Paul Bradley's research on the 2022 World Cup. Spain's high-intensity actions in possession were strongly linked to progression and final-third access. Spain wasn't just running hard. They were running with purpose.

That made me wonder:

Who are the players actually responsible for those actions today?

This project does not use Spain national-team data. Instead, it combines season-long La Liga 2025/26 club data from Driblab Arrigo with physical benchmarks derived from Spain's performances at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

The objective is not to predict exact tournament performance, but to assess which players currently display the physical and tactical characteristics most closely associated with Spain's World Cup identity.

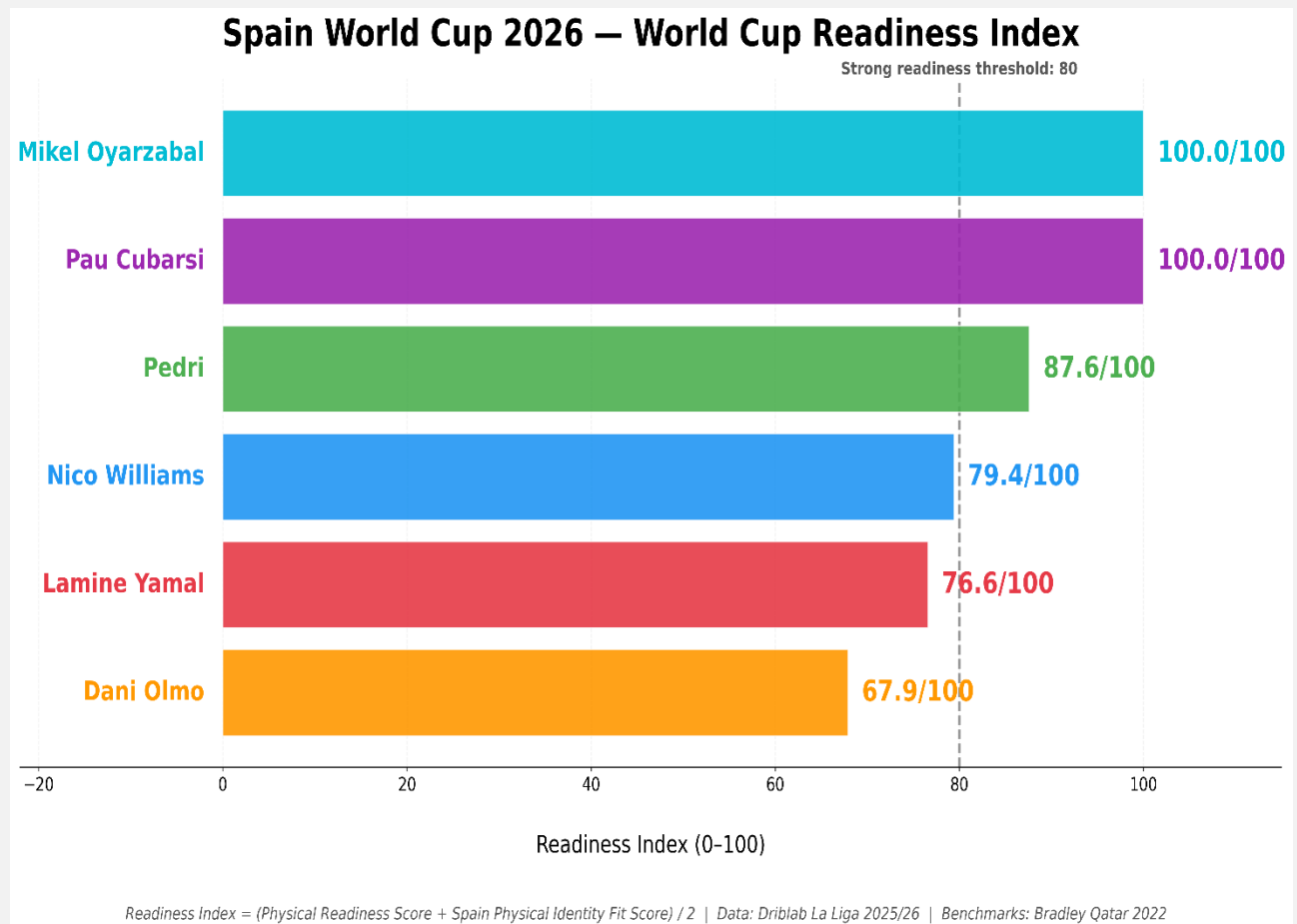
Pau Cubarsí, Pedri, Dani Olmo, Lamine Yamal, Nico Williams and Mikel Oyarzabal.

Physical Readiness First

The project started with physical readiness.

Using Bradley's World Cup benchmarks, I built a Readiness Index combining tournament-level physical standards with Spain's specific physical identity at Qatar 2022.

The Readiness Index therefore compares each player's La Liga 2025/26 physical output against the physical standards demonstrated by Spain during the 2022 World Cup.



The results were largely positive. Cubarsí scored 100/100, the highest in the group. Olmo recorded the lowest Readiness Index.

One important contextual point is that the Readiness Index reflects season-long physical output rather than current fitness status. Several players experienced injury interruptions during the latter stages of the season, including Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams. Their scores therefore describe the physical levels they demonstrated across the season rather than their availability or match fitness heading into the tournament.

If the project had stopped there, the conclusion would have been straightforward.

But football is rarely that simple.

Looking Beyond Physical Output

The next step was to move from physical output to football actions.

Bradley's work showed that progression and final-third entries were the outcomes most strongly associated with Spain's in-possession intensity.

So rather than asking who runs the most, I started asking a different question:

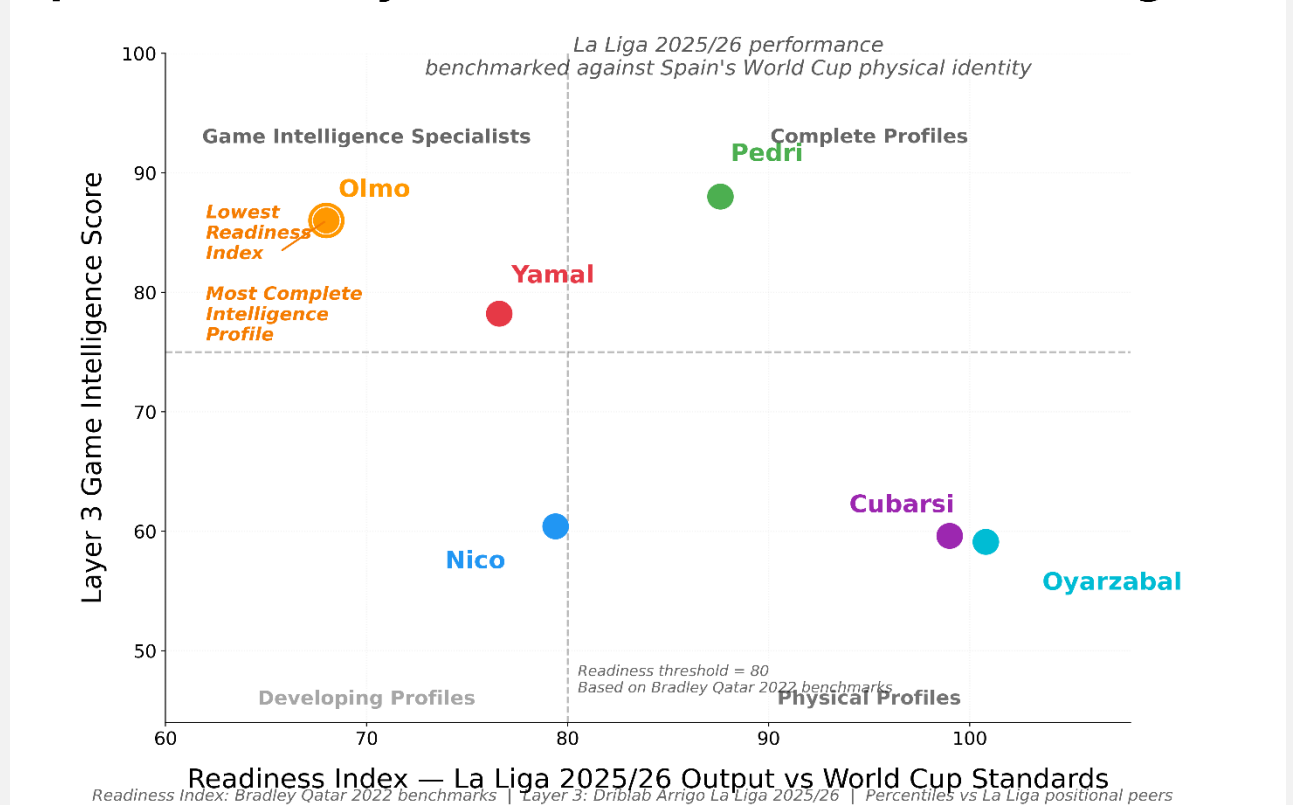
Who helps Spain move the ball forward?

Who helps Spain reach dangerous areas?

Who connects those two things together?

The answer produced a surprisingly coherent attacking network.

Spain 2026: Physical Readiness vs Game Intelligence



Cubarsi starts attacks from deep.

Pedri drives them forward through midfield.

Olmo links midfield to the final third.

Yamal and Nico attack the spaces created.

Oyarzabal occupies central finishing areas.

The data does not suggest every possession follows this exact path. But it does suggest each player contributes to a different stage of the same attacking mechanism.

And the individual profiles reveal something slightly more interesting than a simple chain.

Pedri is clearly the primary progression engine, but Yamal's elite carrying profile means he often drives progression himself rather than simply receiving at the end of sequences. Oyarzabal not only finishes attacks but drops short to connect phases before arriving in dangerous areas.

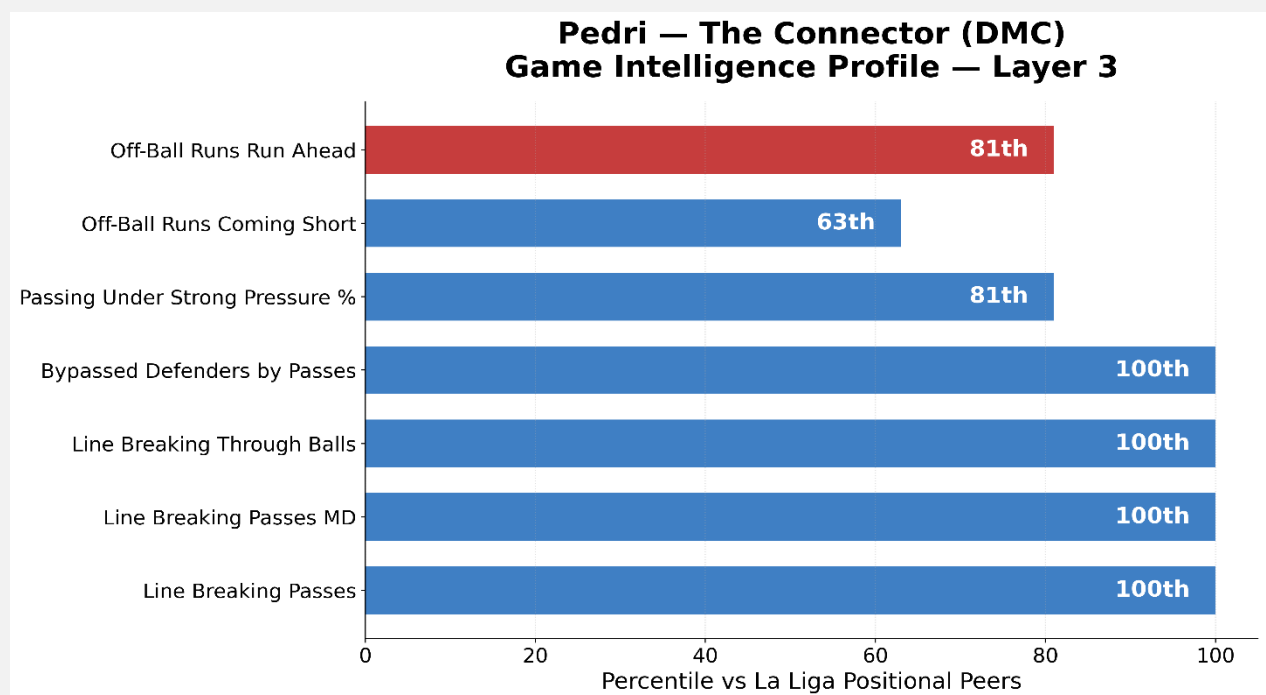
Rather than a strict chain, the data points toward an interconnected network of players contributing to progression and final-third access in different ways.

Pedri: The Progression Engine

No player dominated the progression metrics more than Pedri. He ranked in the 100th percentile for line-breaking passes, line-breaking through balls and bypassed defenders among his La Liga positional peers.

What makes this particularly notable is that Pedri is classified as a defensive midfielder in Driblab's system. He is producing elite attacking-midfielder numbers from a deeper positional role.

The numbers match what most people see when watching him. Pedri is not simply circulating possession. He is constantly looking for ways to move Spain through defensive structures.



If there is one player who appears central to Spain's progression mechanism, it is Pedri.

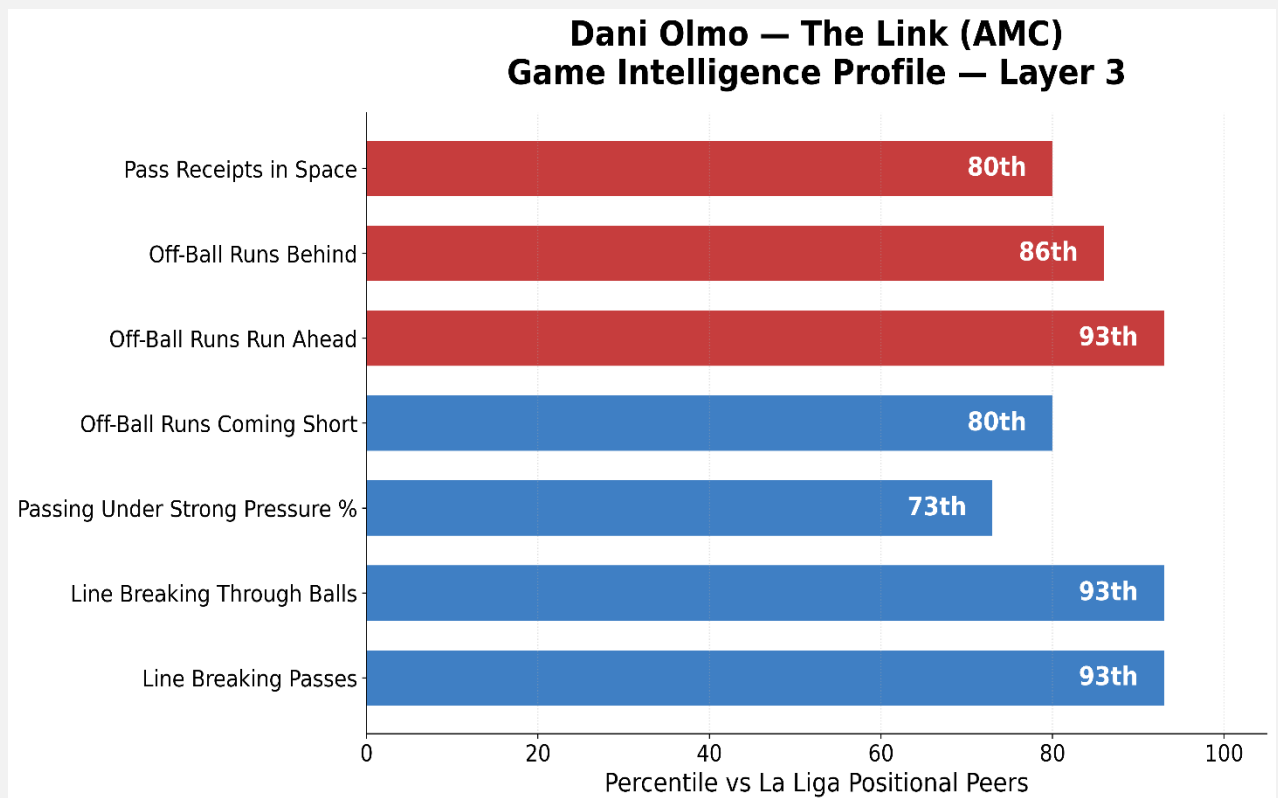
The Surprise: Dani Olmo

The most interesting finding in the project was Dani Olmo.

Physically, he produced the lowest Readiness Index in the group.

Tactically, he produced the strongest overall profile.

His percentile rankings were consistently high across both progression and final-third access. He was the only player who looked equally comfortable connecting attacks and arriving at the end of them.



That matters because his physical Readiness Index was the lowest in the group.

Physical readiness and game intelligence are not always the same thing. A player can contribute enormously to Spain's attacking identity without producing the strongest physical profile.

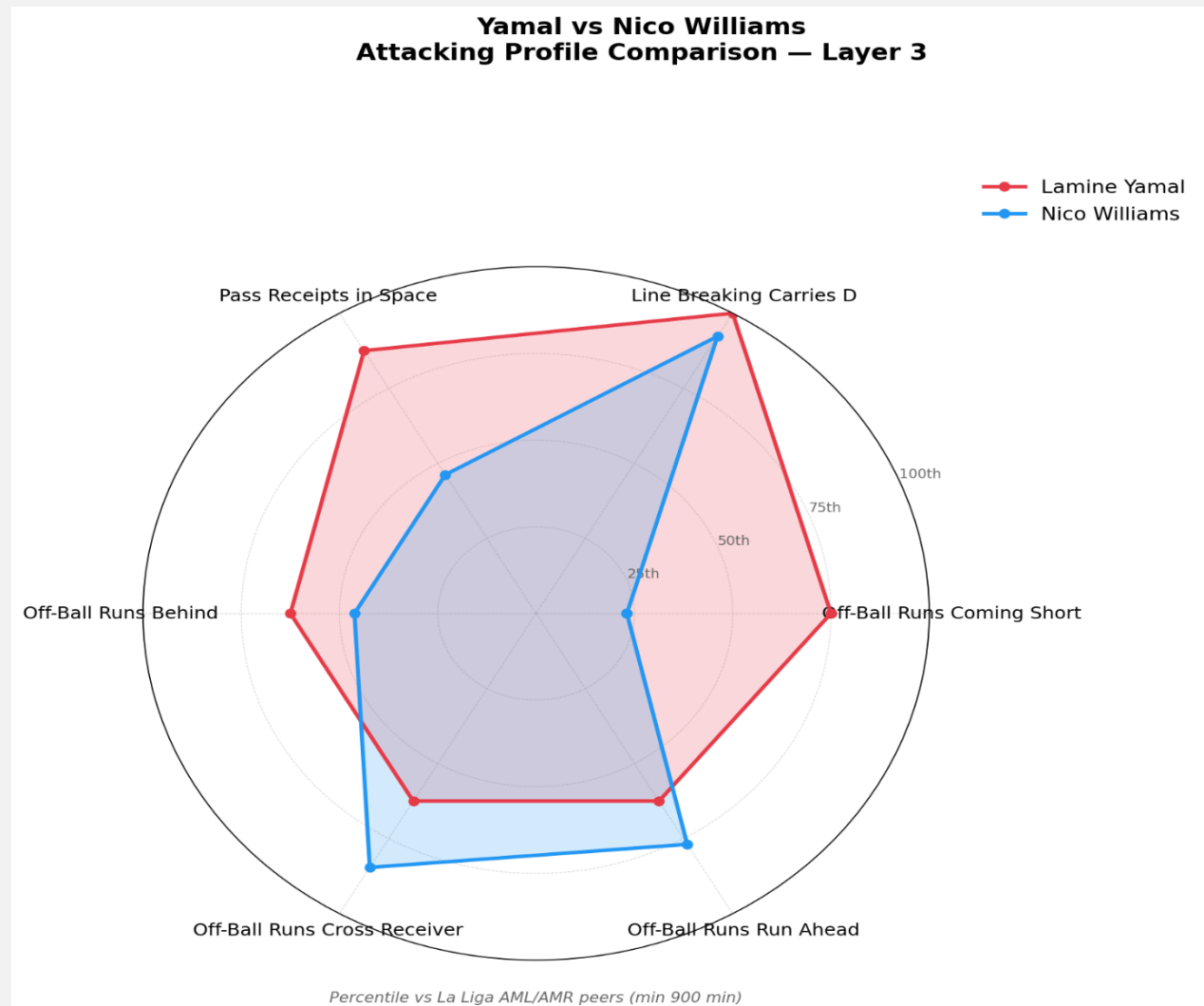
Same Role, Different Solution

Before running the analysis, I expected Nico Williams and Lamine Yamal to produce very similar profiles.

They didn't. Both contribute to Spain's attack, but they do it differently.

Yamal's profile is built around receiving, carrying and creating after receiving.

Nico's profile is more direct. More running into space. More arriving in dangerous areas.



They solve the same problem through different behaviours.

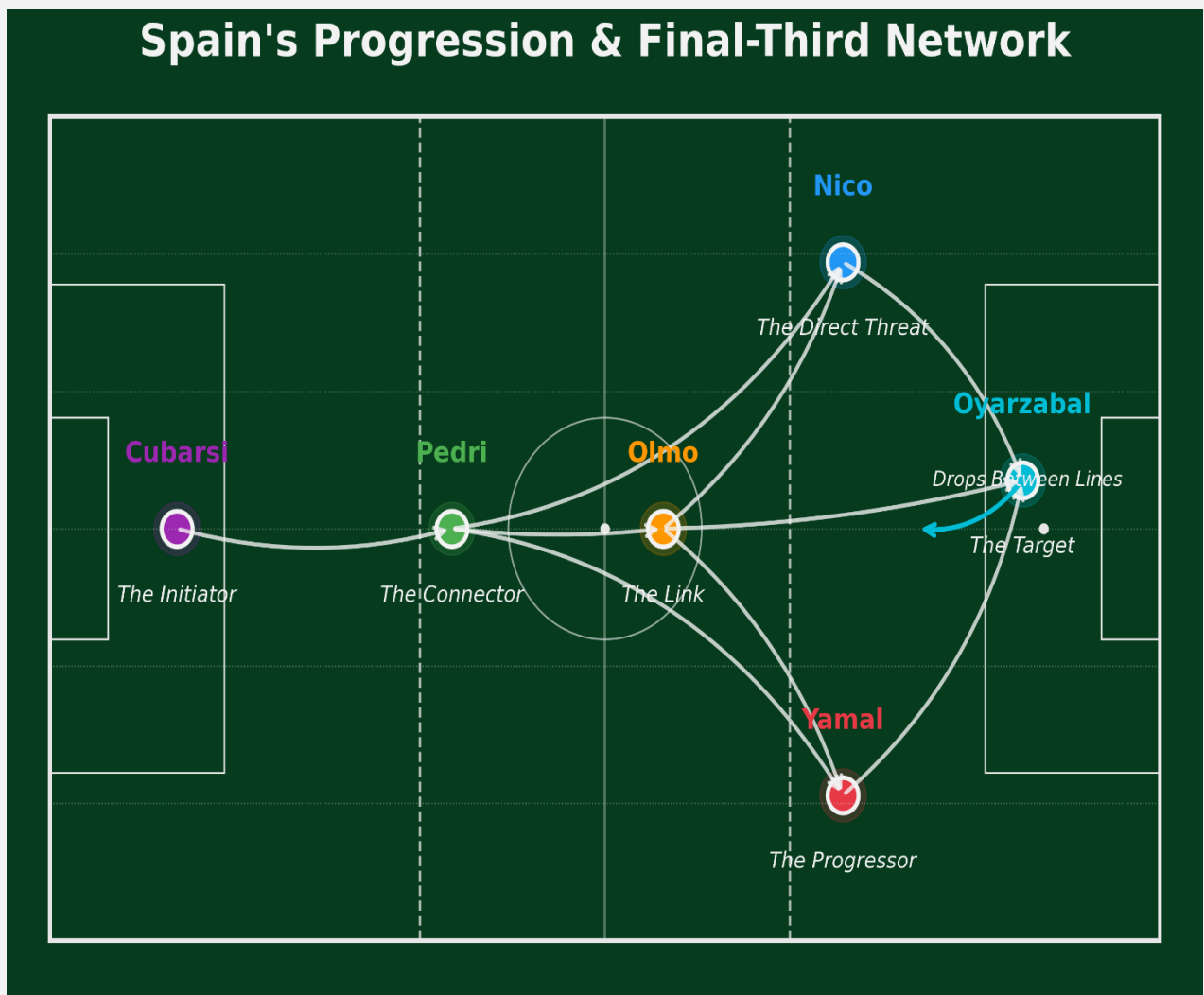
Neither profile should be interpreted as superior. They simply offer Spain different solutions to different defensive problems.

Against a low defensive block, Yamal's combination play and carrying may be more effective. Against a higher line, Nico's direct running and ability to attack space may become the bigger threat.

That distinction could become important across different games during a tournament.

Spain's Progression & Final-Third Network

The individual profiles tell six separate stories. This visual brings them together.



Cubarsi starts from deep. Pedri drives the ball forward. Olmo connects midfield to the final third. Yamal progresses through carrying rather than simply receiving. Nico attacks space directly. Oyarzabal drops between the lines before arriving in central areas to finish. Each player contributes to a different part of the same mechanism.

The network is not a rigid passing sequence. But it does show how six different profiles combine to produce the progression and final-third access that Bradley identified as Spain's physical identity at Qatar 2022.

The pieces fit together differently than expected. Olmo is more central than his physical scores suggested. Yamal is more of a progression driver than a pure receiver. Oyarzabal is more of a connector than a pure finisher. That is probably the most interesting thing the data produced, not what each player does, but how differently they do it.

What I Saw Watching Spain

Alongside the data, I reviewed Spain's matches against Egypt, France, Portugal and Turkey.

The objective was not to validate the data but to understand whether the profiles were consistent with what was happening on the pitch. In general, they were.

Pedri repeatedly emerged as the central progression hub.

Olmo frequently connected midfield and attack through intelligent movement between the lines.

Oyarzabal regularly dropped short before arriving in advanced spaces.

One of the most interesting observations was how often players contributed to multiple phases of the attacking sequence. Yamal did not simply receive at the end of attacks. He often became the progression mechanism himself through carrying.

The data cannot capture every tactical detail, but the broad profiles aligned closely with what was visible in the matches.

Limitations

This analysis is based on club data rather than national-team data.

Arrigo metrics are season totals and cannot currently be filtered by phase of play at player level. Football remains contextual. Opponent quality, game state and tactical instructions all influence player behaviour in ways that season-level data cannot fully capture.

Squad availability at tournament level, including the injury status of Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams at the time of publication, adds further contextual uncertainty.

Full methodology and caveats are available in the GitHub repository.

Final Thoughts

The original goal of this project was to assess whether Spain's key players were physically prepared for the 2026 World Cup.

It ended up answering a more interesting question.

Not who runs the most.

Not who records the highest percentile.

But how different players contribute to the actions that define Spain's attacking identity.

The physical layers suggested most of these players are capable of meeting World Cup demands. Layer 3 suggests they each contribute something different once the game starts.

Pedri emerges as the primary progression engine.

Olmo, despite the lowest physical score in the group, appears to be the most complete tactical profile across both progression and final-third access.

Yamal and Nico offer different solutions to the same tactical problem.

Oyarzabal connects, creates and finishes.

Together those profiles paint a picture of a team whose physical output serves a clear tactical purpose.

The data suggests the pieces fit together.

The World Cup will determine whether the picture is complete.

Full methodology, calculations, visualisations and code available on GitHub.

References

Bradley, P. S., Ade, J., Peart, D., Sheldon, W., & Olsen, P. (2024). *Setting the Benchmark Part 1: Physical Performance Profiles at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022*. Biology of Sport.

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Analysis by Yiannis Kastritis

Data: Driblab La Liga 2025/26

Framework inspired by Paul Bradley's Setting the Benchmark Parts 1 and 2 (Biology of Sport, 2024)