FRANCE — SPAIN · WORLD CUP 2026 SEMI-FINAL

France Spain, the difference between stars and a system

In the 2026 World Cup semi-final, France lose 0-2 to Spain — a third straight defeat after Euro 2024 and the 2025 Nations League. Every time, the same script. This dossier shows, with the numbers, why.

THE CONTEXT

Three defeats, one paradox

France never won, though it often held the ball and carried it forward. The problem isn’t reaching Spain’s half — it’s what happens there: an outnumbered midfield, a stacked attack, balls handed back, leads not held. Four cogs, taken apart.

EUROS 2024 · SEMI-FINAL	1 – 2
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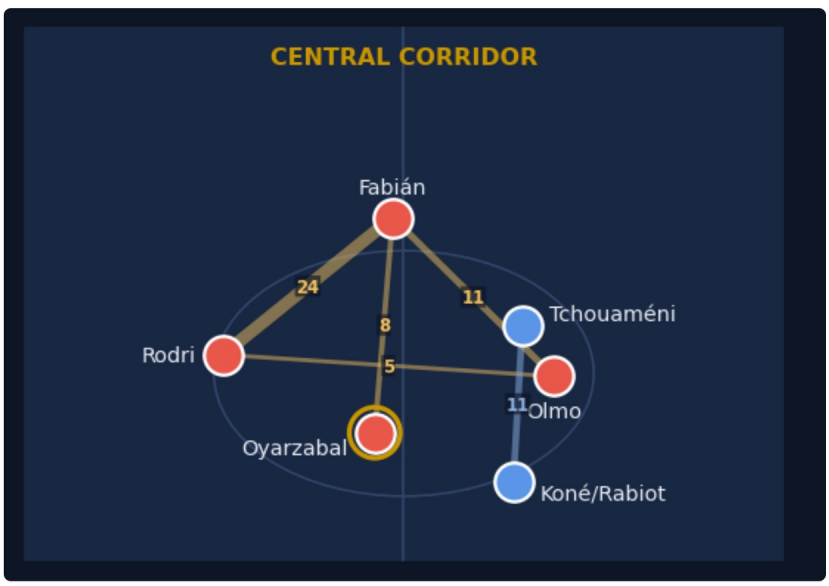
France leads only once (Euros, 8’). In the other two it chases the game from inside the first quarter-hour.

01 · THE MIDFIELD

Two against three — and Oyarzabal makes four

In central areas Spain always plants one body more. Against France’s double pivot, Rodri, Fabián and Olmo fill the corridor; Oyarzabal drops to make the overload. Spain touches, receives and links up nearly twice as often — and its midfield is far more connected (Rodri-Fabián: 24 passes).

	ESP	FRA
CENTRAL TOUCHES	119	78
CENTRAL RECEPTIONS	85	43
PIVOT LINKS	24	10



Central corridor (WC 2026). Gold = intra-midfield passing axes (Rodri-Fabián: 24). Oyarzabal (gold ring) drops level with Rodri to make the +1.

The first duel is a numbers game — France loses it before it has the ball.

02 · THE BUILD-UP

Spain builds through midfield, France around it

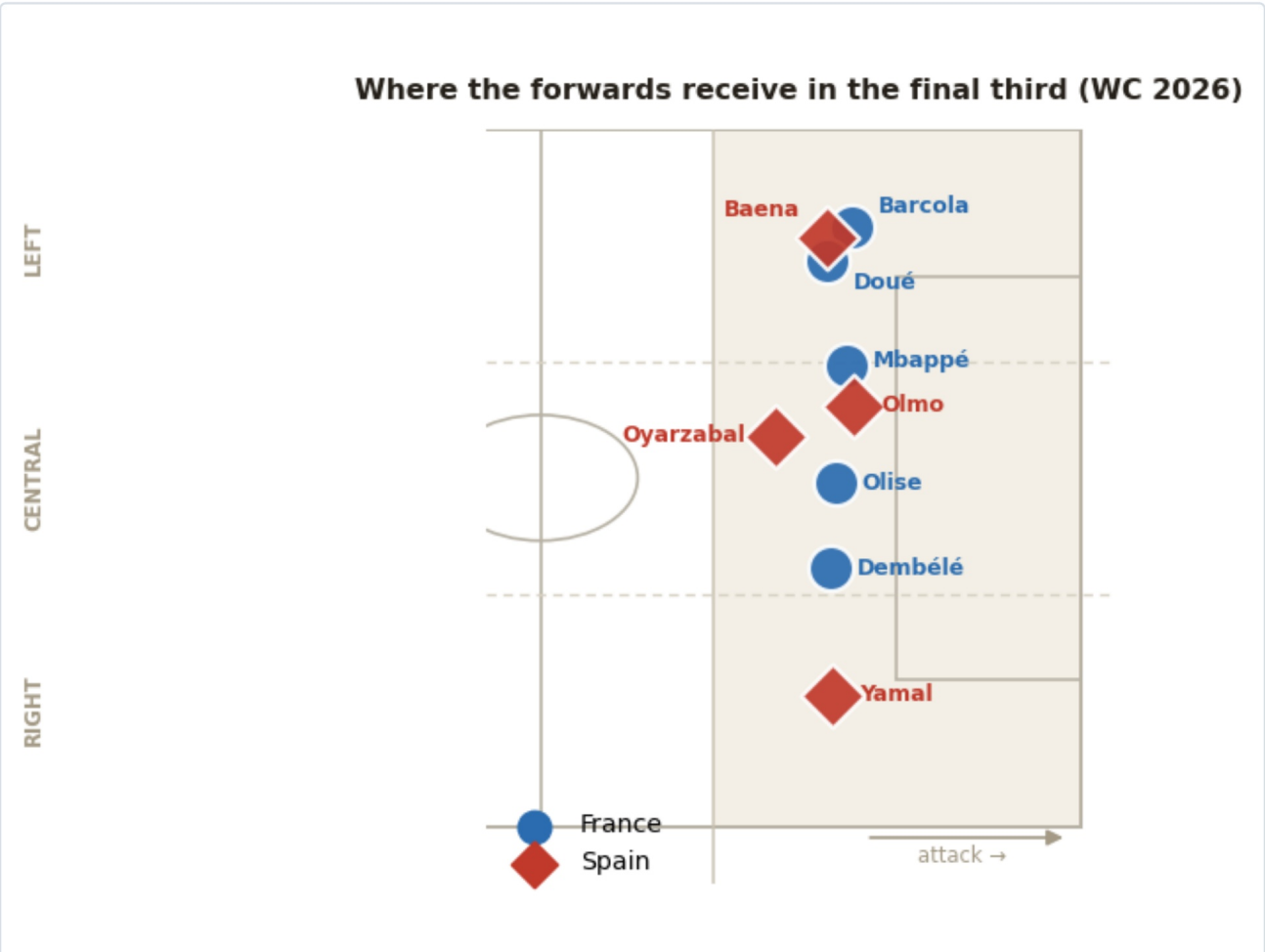
The main passing axes say it: Spain's deep-build conduits are midfielders (Fabián, Rodri, fed by Laporte). France's are one defender and two forwards — Upamecano, Dembélé, Mbappé — no midfielder. France doesn't build through its engine room: it goes around it.



Top-4 passing axes + midfielders + full-backs (Koné/Rabiot merged). Gold = main links; arrows = share of final-third play by channel.

Too far left

By going around midfield, France stacks its attack. Average receiving positions in the final third: Mbappé receives at y≈66 — a dropped left winger, not a central focal point; Barcola and Doué wider left still. On the right, Dembélé is alone on a near-dead flank. Spain stretches the width.



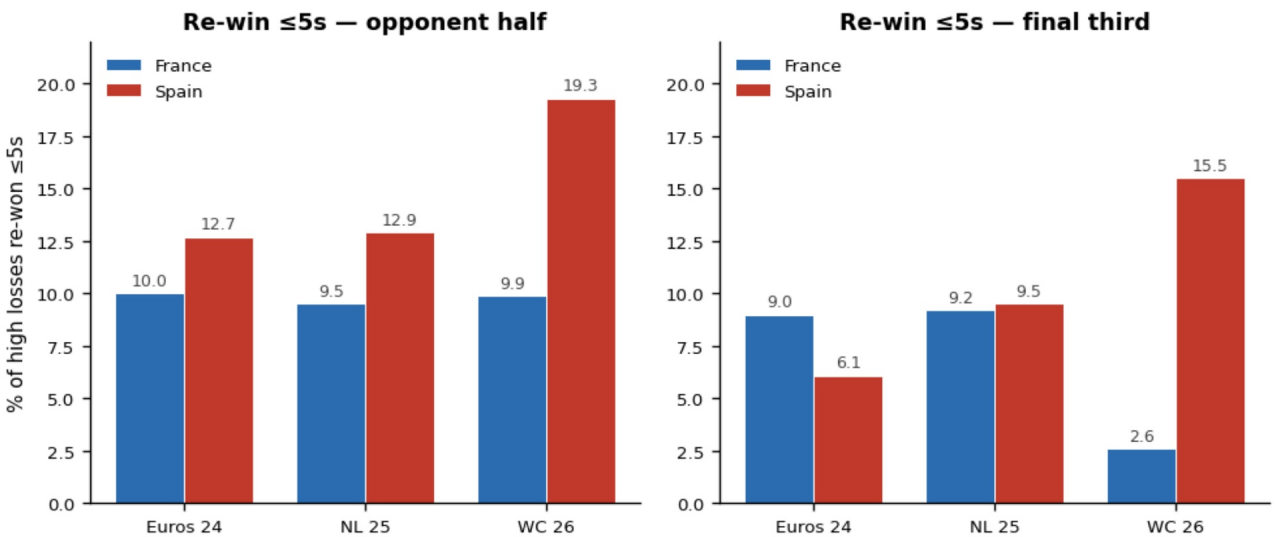
Average receiving position of the forwards in the final third (WC 2026). France stacked left; Spain spread across all three channels.

France loses the midfield AND concentrates the attack — two problems that feed each other.

04 · LOSING IT

We lose the ball, we don’t win it back

Losing high is fine if you win it straight back. Spain does; France doesn’t. And at the most fragile moment — the midfield-to-attack pass — it’s France that coughs up the most.



Ball re-won within 5 s of a high loss, per match. At the World Cup, Spain spikes (19.3 / 15.5 %) while France collapses in the final third (2.6 %).

PPDA — OPPONENT PASSES CONCEDED PER HIGH DEFENSIVE ACTION

14.1 FRANCE **12.3** SPAIN

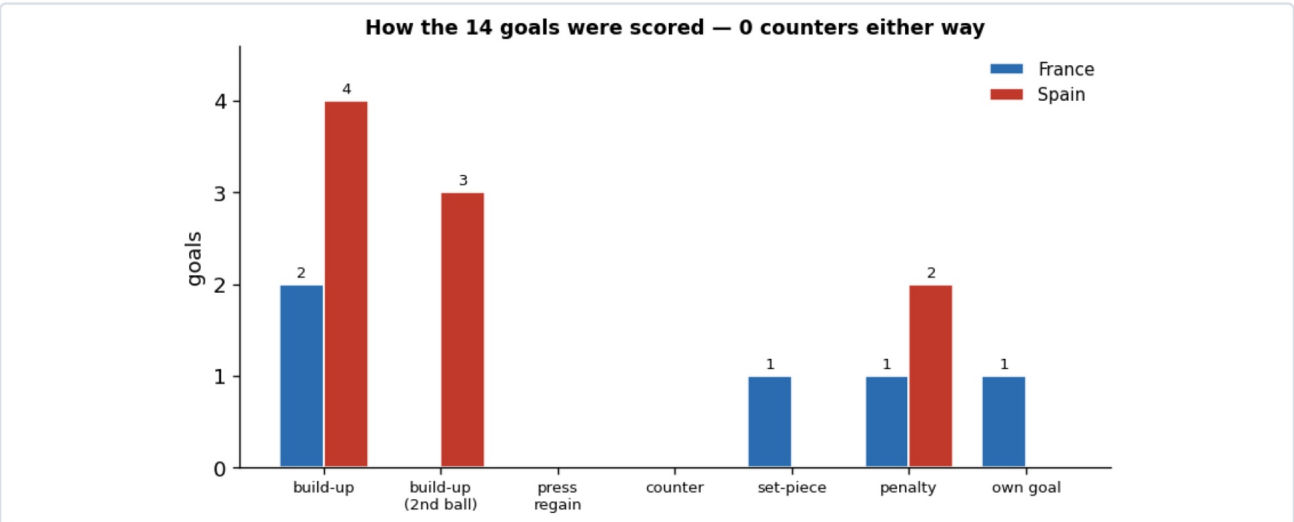
The lower the number, the more aggressive the press. Counting recoveries: 8.9 vs 7.8. Spain smothers the build-up.

BALLS LOST ON RECEPTION (MIDFIELD → ATTACK)

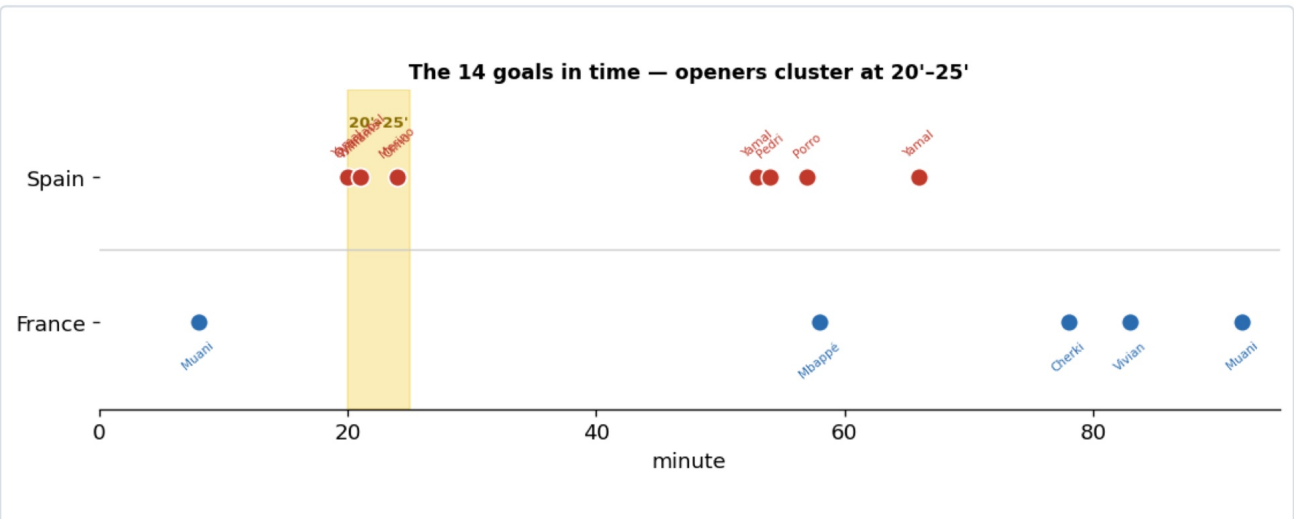
35% FRANCE **29%** SPAIN

France ahead? Spain comes back. Spain ahead? It’s over.

France led once in three games — Euros, 8’ → 20’ — then Spain equalised and won. Conversely, every time Spain went ahead (all three) it held. Not one goal from a counter: Spain’s edge is built in settled play, and never handed back.



Anatomy of the 14 goals: Spain scores in build-up (7); nobody scores on the counter.



The openers cluster around 20’–25’ — Spain goes ahead early, then manages.

THE VERDICT

Four cogs, one conclusion

France reaches Spain’s half but loses every duel that matters there: the midfield overload, building through the engine room, width in attack, the re-win after a loss. Alone, each cog costs a few chances. Together they make three defeats. Talent isn’t the issue — structure is.

01 Midfield — find the +1, escape the 2-v-3.

02 Build-up — route the first pass THROUGH the midfielders.

03 Attack — occupy the right, pin the centre.

04 Transition — counter-press within 5 seconds.

Antoine Ollivier · Quantum Sports Analytics · StatsBomb 360 & Opta data.

EPILOGUE · WHAT THE WINNER SAID

Spain's manager says the same thing, without the numbers

After the semi-final, Luis de la Fuente summed the match up in a single line, reported by Le Parisien. He talks about neither individual talent nor luck: he talks about a playing idea built over years.

> “The best players in the world” lost to “the best team in the world”.
>
> LUIS DE LA FUENTE, SPAIN MANAGER — QUOTED IN LE PARISIEN, 15 JULY 2026 (TRANSLATED)

That is this dossier's conclusion, stated without data. Where de la Fuente talks about a playing idea, the four cogs give the mechanics: the permanent +1 in midfield, a build-up that runs through the engine room instead of around it, width that is actually occupied, the ball won back within five seconds. It is the winner's account, so treat it with care — but it lines up, point by point, with what the numbers show.

> **France's talent was only ever waiting for a structure. Spain had one.**