EDITORIAL

An exceptional year confronted members of the coaching profession with unprecedented, unforeseen challenges such as lockdowns; rearranged, high-intensity fixture lists; tournaments postponed or cancelled; squads decimated by COVID-19 and its associated protocols; and empty stadiums requiring self-motivation. This was reflected in the pages of The Technician. The scenario prompted an in-depth review of fitness issues and the management of training schedules and injury risks when players were required to return to peak-performance levels at short notice. Meanwhile, a look at the way national team coaches were preparing for UEFA’s Under-17 competitions provoked thoughts on the longer-term impact that the inevitable cancellations might have on player development and international careers.

Fortunately, other aspects of the game withstood the onslaught. Although coach education courses and methodologies might require adaptations, the new UEFA Coaching Convention, with its additional specialised branches, augurs well for the future, while the 25th birthday of UEFA’s Jira Panel prompted reflections on the development of coach education in Europe over the last quarter-century.

At the same time, the silver anniversary of UEFA’s technical reports triggered a similar review and prefaced some sampling of the trends – such as the increasing prevalence of advanced high-intensity pressing and high-risk styles – highlighted by technical observers during the 2019/20 UEFA Champions Leagues (men and women) and the UEFA Europa League.

Meanwhile, some abiding truths stood firm amid the viral turbulences. The Technician featured an excellent article on the importance of nutrition. And the Republic of Ireland’s all-time top scorer Robbie Keane reflected on the transition from playing to coaching and reminded us that: “The most important thing is to enjoy what you do. I was in training sessions for 20 years with different managers with different variations and different styles. But the key factor is the small detail. If one player can take one little thing away from a training session that will help him improve or give him the knowledge that we want him to take away, then we’ve already been successful.” That is a message that will endure far beyond COVID-19.

Frank K. Ludolph
Head of Technical Development
With the kind of speed which saw him torment defenders in the English Premier League and at international level, Robbie Keane started his coaching career in 2018, the same year that he hung up his boots after 21 seasons as a professional footballer.

However, for Keane, now assistant manager with Middlesbrough FC and the Republic of Ireland, this was no knee-jerk decision. A keen student of the game, the Republic of Ireland’s record goalscorer had been working on his UEFA coaching badges for six years prior to his first coaching appointment.

The transition from player to coach, the art of goal-scoring, and the varying challenges of coaching at club and international level were among the topics Keane covered in his talk to student coaches at the UEFA Pro licence student exchange course.

Among the other speakers at the UEFA course were Northern Ireland national team coach Michael O’Neill, former FC Basel president Bernhard Heusler, Sergio Lara-Bercial, reader in sport coaching at Leeds Beckett University, and Josh Hershman, managing director of Ten Toes Media.

During the discussions, heavy emphasis was placed on the key themes from last season’s UEFA Champions League, as outlined in the newly released 2018/19 UEFA Champions League technical report on www.uefatechnicalreports.com.

Technical reports provide important insights into European football’s technical and tactical development – and they can now be found on a dedicated UEFA website.

Did you always plan to go straight into coaching after you retired from playing? I’ve been doing my coaching badges for six years now, so when I knew that I was at the end of my career, I knew that it was certainly a path that I wanted to go down. Of course, when you’re young, when you’re 21 years of age, you don’t think about that. That’s normal because you’re so young, you’re focused on what you’re doing, you’re just starting your career. As the latter stages of your career come, it’s certainly something you think about. When I reached 30, it was certainly something I would watch closely, in terms of managers and how they treated me, how they treated players, how they spoke to people, how they spoke to the media, how they put training sessions on... I’d always look closely, without my coaches really knowing I was watching.

Has coaching been what you expected it to be? And what have you found the biggest challenge or the biggest surprise? I love it, I absolutely love it. I’m very fortunate that I’ve got two jobs – with the Irish national team as assistant manager and with Middlesbrough FC, also as assistant manager, so it’s given me different ideas. With the Irish team, you’re going from having three or four days’ training and then away for two months. So, to get your coaching across and get your teeth really into it on the training pitch, I’ve found... I wouldn’t say frustrating is the word, but you’re enjoying it so much and then it’s gone for a couple of months... And with the Middlesbrough job and the day-to-day stuff, I’ve got the best of both worlds really, also in terms of learning from an experienced manager like Mick McCarthy, who’s incredible as a man-manager, watching him and how he does things and how he speaks to people.
And obviously I had him as a coach as well. And then going to Middlesbrough, Jonathan Woodgate, who I have been friends with for a long time, we’re the same age, and I’ve been able to see how he is with the day-to-day stuff.

You played at the highest level. How important is it to have had a playing career before you go into management?

It gives you the experience of the dressing room, it gives you the experience of the fans, it gives you the experience of going to away games, going Tuesday night away from home in December. You know how to deal with the media as a player, so you’ve already got a foot forward in terms of some of the hazards. But that doesn’t mean you’re still going to be as good as other coaches. It just gives you experience, it’s how you treat people, how you speak to people, how you respect people. I think that’s a big factor. If you want to be a coach and you love what you do, you have to dedicate your life to it. I left Dublin when I was 15 to go to Wolverhampton Wanderers, with my family in Ireland. I moved back to Ireland two years ago from Los Angeles, and I’ve done it again, I’ve left Ireland again, but I’m starting a different career. But I’ve left my wife there, and my kids. Now that’s just for now; it doesn’t mean it’s going to be like that in the future, but I’ve literally gone full circle. You have to be committed if you want to do what you do. I’m looking at it as a completely different journey that I’m going on, but it’s still with the same focus of being the best and wanting to dedicate my life to my craft.

What is your coaching methodology? How do you transfer your knowledge and your own playing philosophy to the players?

People forget about small details. Anybody can put a training session on. We’ve all done training sessions; I’ve been in training sessions for 20 years but with different managers with different variations and different styles of how they want to do things. But the key factor is the small detail. If one player can take one little thing away from a training session that will help him improve as a player, or give him the knowledge that we want him to take away for the game on Saturday, then we’ve already been successful.

You’re so well-known and well-respected as a player, do you think that brings more pressure?

I don’t mind that because I’ve always had it. When you’ve had it, you’re used to it. It’s like scoring goals. Scoring goals is a habit. The more you do it, the easier it becomes. It’s the same with pressure. I put pressure on myself more than anybody else would. It’s important that you keep the same level of integrity, and when you win a game, you don’t get too high and, if you lose a game, you don’t get too low.

What would you say is your preferred playing philosophy today?

Playing it on the ground. All of my teams I’ve played with have always dominated possession of the ball. That’s the way I want to play. But you have to adapt as well to where you are. We’re going to play against Switzerland next month [European Qualifier last October]. Now, we’re not going to dominate possession against Switzerland, so how do we adapt to that? Do we do a training session based on possession all the time leading up to the game? Why? We’re not going to have that much of the ball, so do more overloads. So maybe low blocks, mid-blocks, and how we can catch them on the counterattack. That’s what we have to do, you have to adapt to your situation.

What’s the best piece of advice you received when you were a player?

How they spoke to people, how they spoke to the media, how they put training sessions on… I’d always look closely, without my coaches really knowing I was watching.
I was always taking a lot of things in, from a lot of different people, different managers. The most important thing is to just enjoy what you do. Don’t come into work thinking that it’s a job. I never used to think about it as a job. I’m getting paid for something I absolutely love doing. That’s not a job. Every day I go in, even when I was 37 years of age, I’d wake up excited in the morning wanting to go to training. I used to wake up on a Saturday and I couldn’t wait to play the game, and that’s a feeling that you have to have. You can’t go into training or wake up in the morning and go, “ugh, I’ve got training today.” It can’t be like that because that’s when your mentality changes, that’s when you don’t really focus and you don’t really want to be the best that you can be.

How important are technology, data and analytics, and how do you use them? Is it important to be on top of those developments?

Yes, I think you have to. It’s part of football now. You have to be a part of it, but you have to be clever with it as well. You can’t be telling somebody he can’t do another shooting session because his load is too high, because that’s his craft, he needs to work on it. But, of course, you have to listen to it, you take it on board. You know when to do your training sessions. On Tuesday or Wednesday, it may be a lot higher intensity than it would be on a Thursday. But you can’t say to someone the day before a game, or I wouldn’t anyway, “Oh, your numbers, I think you’re a bit tired.” Psychologically, straight away, he’s going into a game tomorrow thinking that he’s tired. So, I would flip that and go, “You’re flying you are, you’re great, your numbers are great,” and then maybe tell him on Monday. You have to be careful how you speak to people and how you can actually get into people’s heads. That’s managing people, that’s man-managing people.

In September, Troy Parrott became the first Irishman to play for Tottenham since Yourself and Caoimhín Kelleher became the first Irishman to play for Liverpool. What is the reason behind this resurgence of Irish youth footballers?

Obviously, the association is doing something right. The grassroots are certainly doing something great. When I came through, it was myself, Damien Duff, Richard Dunne, Shay Given, all at the same time. And then for 20 years, it hasn’t really happened and there are people coming in flutters. Now it looks like, looking at the Under-21s, there could be five or six potential players there where you say, “They could be in the squad in a year or two.” Now, that’s up to them, how they progress and how they continue to stay at the clubs they’re at by continuing to play games all the time. Every so often, surges of players just come along. I’m hoping this will be the case for this generation coming up, and that could certainly push Irish football to where we were 15 or 20 years ago.

How important are UEFA coach education and UEFA coaching licences, and what do they mean for you and coaching in general?

It is massive for everyone. We were speaking with the lads from the Irish FA, all the lads who are on the course now. I’ve been doing this for six years, from the B licence to the A, and now, with the difference between then and now, it’s massive for all of us. The stuff you hear when the speakers come in, you listen to how they manage people, how they speak to people. We’ve had some great speakers in. Mick McCarthy was one of them, obviously who I know very well. Michael O’Neill was here today. So they are relevant to us because they work in Ireland and they have worked in England. Just listening to how they manage people is huge for your confidence in terms of speaking. Getting in front of a classroom; it’s daunting to get in front of a classroom or up on stage and speak to people. I got up there yesterday and I didn’t even think about it. Five years ago, to get up on a stage and have to give a presentation, naturally you’d be out of your comfort zone. It’s giving you that platform to be comfortable on stage, to be comfortable speaking in front of people, to be comfortable putting on a session. It’s been a great learning curve for everybody.

Keane scored over 300 goals at club level, notably for Leeds United, Tottenham Hotspur and LA Galaxy

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For those boys’ Under-17 national teams participating in March’s elite round of qualification, the goal is clear: to win one of the 15 tickets to May’s final tournament in Estonia. The European Under-17 Championship is the first of UEFA’s continental prizes that a generation of players can aim for, and each national association will have already undertaken a long process to put their squad in place.

UEFA Direct spoke to the Under-17 head coaches of England, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland – Kevin Betsy, José Alcocer, Peter van der Veen, David Gordo and Stefan Marini – to gather their thoughts on talent identification, player development and their preparations (and targets) for their upcoming European Under-17 Championship assignments.

Finding the players

The French Football Federation (FFF) has approximately 60,000 licensed players in each generation. The task of Alcocer and his colleagues is to identify which ones might become footballers for France. How?

“Through different processes carried out from the Under-15s, we identify a list of 250 players,” Alcocer begins. “Of those 250 players, I see around 120, of whom 80 become ‘internationals’ and with whom we carry out activities – training camps, get-togethers, matches, etc.” And what he is looking for is the following: “Game intelligence, technique, mindset and speed – change of rhythm and gestural speed.”

Ahead of March’s elite round in Hungary, Alcocer will have been able to observe his players in two friendlies against Denmark in February – before having three days to work with them prior to the elite round kicking off. Monitoring their progress the rest of the time involves watching as many of their club matches as possible, while he also receives videos from clubs’ youth departments and speaks to academy directors and coaches. “We also have technical staff in each region who submit reports on the players we’re following.”

It is equally illuminating hearing the approach taken by his Dutch counterpart, Van der Veen, who oversaw his nation’s triumph in Ireland last May. It was the Netherlands’ second successive continental crown at this level, which suggests they must be doing something right.

Van der Veen says the starting point is finding young footballers with ‘soft feet’ – i.e. an innate talent with the ball – and then focusing on five aspects, the most important one of which, he suggests, is mentality. He lists the others, starting with the “technical ability to get away under pressure”, and then tactical and physical attributes and finally “learning ability, because we don’t have lot of time to train together as a national team, so they have to learn quickly what we want.”

In order to know his young players better, Van der Veen visits them at their clubs, while club coaches join the activities of the national teams. “For instance, I go to PSV for two days and join the Under-17s and Under-19s and will be on the pitch with the training session, so you see the development of every player there,” he elaborates.

“We also do it with the players who play abroad. I went to Hoffenheim for three days, and Manchester City for two days. That’s how you see the players in their own habitat. The coaches sometimes
call me after a few months and say, “You have to look at this player now because he’s developing really well,” and then I’ll go and watch him on a Saturday. The way we work in joining the sessions with the clubs is a big part of our success, I think.”

Getting used to wearing the England shirt

Across the North Sea in England, another reflection comes from the English Football Association’s men’s Under-17 coach, Betsy, who says planning for this qualification round effectively begins at Under-15 level. He explains: “We have training camps. We have year of birth difference in training camps and then split them into three groups for each year. So it will be January-April, May-August, September-December. Normally in that Under-15 year we’ll see around 75 players across the year. Some of them are invited to training camps only and some of them play international fixtures, but it’s very much a step process, where it’s training camps, training camps and matches, and at the end of the year we have a tournament to get players used to wearing the England shirt and not making the shirt feel heavy at a younger age.”

This work continues right up to the point when qualification begins: “We’re still covering some players that we haven’t seen in the 15 and 16 age groups, and then really trying to finalise the squad that will represent us in the qualification period. It’s basically a long-term plan where we’re making sure that the players come through the pathway, enjoy the experience, become familiar with how we play and how we work.”

For Spain’s Under-17 coach, Gordo, the system in place at the Royal Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) headquarters at Las Rozas ensures he has a good knowledge of the players stepping up to his age category. “Here we all work with every age group,” he explains. “There is a head coach, but at any moment of the season the rest of the coaches can take part in training camps or sessions with any of the groups.”

This meant last year he supported Julen Guerrero, the national Under-16 coach, in his work with the players he has since inherited. “I was lucky enough to share some moments with this group – I was Julen’s assistant and I got to know them. “We manage between 50 and 60 players approximately,” he adds. “From this, we have to select 20 for the elite round. When we choose players, we think they are players who can adapt. For their development, they have to cope with going into a new group.”

Another case is that of Switzerland, a smaller country with a smaller pool to draw from according to their coach, Marini. “We have a pool of about 30 to 35 players from which we will recruit for the elite round,” he says. And the selection criteria he applies are as follows: “The players must have enough personality to be able to give a strong performance in an important tournament, but in general, we evaluate their technique, game intelligence and their physical characteristics.”

Laying down a style

When it comes to establishing a style of play at Under-17 level, it is the senior national team who provide the reference point for France’s Alcocer. He elaborates: “We have a national team coordinator in France who sets out the framework for trying to play a certain way: a possession game, a zonal defending, full-backs who can start attacks. We have a common base. After that, the style of play of the A team sets the examples, such as the speed of transitional play and collective discipline.”

Spanish football provides one of the clearest examples of a nation with a particular philosophy – one which has brought success to senior and junior levels this century. “We have an idea of the style of play that best suits the profile of the Spanish footballer,” says Gordo. “We’ve gained good results from one way of playing. Clearly, everybody has their own personal interpretation, but we know the general lines to follow as this is what has brought success in the past.”

In England, it was in 2014 that The FA established its ‘England DNA’ philosophy for the national sides – a thread running through the youngest age groups to the senior squad. “The only thing that changes is the size of the shirt from the Under-15s to the seniors,” says Betsy.

“‘It’s definitely something that the technical director formerly [Dan Ashworth] and the England manager [Gareth Southgate] wanted to implement into the age groups. The style was very much to dominate possession and territory, and be really focused in our intensity once we lose possession of the ball. The best teams in the world dominate possession and we wanted to make sure our players had a similar pathway throughout each group.”

If Dutch football is famed for its 4-3-3 framework, Van der Veen stresses it is play of that play must most to the young Dutch squads. “Every team plays with the same principles;” he says. “For example, if we lose the ball, we want it back in five seconds.”

In the view of Switzerland coach Marini, meanwhile, a more flexible approach has its benefits. “At this level we still remain very variable,” he says. “We still want to train the players thoroughly, to let them play in different systems and not have them locked into a single system.”

Solutions to the relative age effect

In a conversation with national team youth coaches, it would be remiss to overlook the relative age effect. According to Alcocer, the FFT runs a parallel programme of activities for players born in the second half of the year and for those players born in the first half but who fit the profile of late developers.

He goes on: “We organise ‘Future’ camps where we bring along players in one or other of those categories. Each season we put together a Future team which plays friendly matches in order to give them international experience and test them at a high level.”

The Swiss Football Association takes a similar approach with its Under-15s, organising a second team who play their own fixtures. Marini adds: “We do so partly at Under-16 level as well, so that we can keep track of them.”

At the Royal Netherlands Football Association’s base at Zeist, the Future group of players have the advantage of sharing training facilities with their more advanced peers. Van der Veen explains: “We have a group of approximately 40 Under-17 players and a Future group next to it. These are players who are behind in physical growth. We have the same system at Under-14, Under-15 and Under-16, and over the years we see a few of those smaller players develop and come into the team at Under-17 level.”

Peter van der Veen

The Technician
As for the young players passing along the English FA’s talent line, Betsy says: “We’re very mindful of growth and maturation with this delicate age group. Some of those selected are Under-14 players and we have to give them a fair assessment of where they’re at and when the right moment is to bring them into the pathway. The most important thing is the long-term potential we see in the player at the different stages.”

While Betsy can cite an example like Phil Foden, a small but highly technical footballer who has progressed all the way from the Under-15s to the brink of the senior squad, Spain offer the prime example of a European nation that puts its faith in small players right through the age levels. “If we like a player, we’ll keep faith with them,” says Gordo. “[Andrés] Iniesta and Xavi are examples of the smaller players with technique, who might lack stature at this age but have ability.”

Improvements, Spanish-style
Gordo goes on to provide an insight into his efforts to improve his players – as footballers and as individuals. He considers video an essential tool and records both matches and training sessions in order to capture images to illustrate points he wishes to make. “Seeing images and getting to know opponents, and perhaps above all, seeing themselves perform different actions – be it making a mistake or doing something positive – helps us to reinforce the good things and correct their mistakes or things they are doing less well,” he says. “Pictures are very important. We have a saying that a picture is worth a thousand words – we believe this, as when the lads see images, they’re much more receptive to assimilating ideas and understanding the dynamics of the game.”

It is not just football lessons for Spain’s youth internationals either, as the RFEF provides a tutor for when they are away with the national squad in order to support them with their school studies. “Every day we dedicate time to their academic work. Their clubs’ tutors send us work for them to do while they are away with us. We’re very keen to make sure they get this done and that when they go back to their schools, they have their work done and are prepared for exams. It’s vital in their education – we want them to have a broad education as a player and as a person, so we place a lot of importance on this.”

On the question of educating minds, Alcorcón touches on his players’ mental development from a sporting perspective, speaking of his responsibility to help his players “open up and share with others”. He says: “A coach must try to make the player self-sufficient – able to evaluate his performances, to watch a match with the eyes of a player, to take a lead role in his own progression.”

Winning or learning?
The above-mentioned efforts are all focused on taking teams to the European Under-17 final tournament in May – and, once there, trying to win it. No nation can match Spain’s nine triumphs in this competition (including its pre-2001 guise as an Under-16 event), but Gordo, the man tasked with achieving a tenth victory this year, concedes short-term glory is not the only goal. “For us the ultimate objective is that our players carry on developing so one day they can play in the senior national team,” he says. “This is the objective. And... our first priority. But results are important too as we want players to improve by playing in all the best competitions, so if you’re not in the EURO, we can’t develop you fully.”

For coaches working in youth categories, the key, as Gordo suggests, is to find the right balance for their players between winning and learning. Marín offers a Swiss perspective: “At the Under-15 and Under-16 level, the result is still secondary. At these lower levels, it’s more about selection, getting to know players, training them, etc. From Under-17 and Under-18 level, the result is much more important.”

Alcorcón, who is hoping to steer France to a first success since 2015, notes that “there’s still a long path” for his players beyond this level, as he adds his own reflections. “We try to have the best balance possible,” he says. “Winning matches is inevitably the aim when you get out on the pitch, but from our side, we insist above all on what must be done to win a match.”

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When the final word goes to Van der Veen, whose Dutch squad are seeking a hat-trick of Under-17 titles. Win or lose, he believes a high level of competition is vital for his youngsters’ ongoing progression – and this, he argues, is where Dutch players have a head start on some of their peers. “The compact size of the Netherlands helps in this regard. ‘There’s a good structure, where the best can play the best – we have to drive three hours to them. They have their sights set on a third consecutive title in Estonia, which would be a competition first.”

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Non-playing substitutes and goalkeepers have lower energy requirements than starting outfield players and they’re aware that their food intake needs to reflect this during camps."

Never mind Molière, we have come a long way even since 1990, when an Ireland squad captained by McCarthy were told to drink Guinness by manager Jack Charlton on the eve of their World Cup quarter-final against Italy in Rome in order to settle any nerves. Different times, as underlined by UEFA Direct’s discussions with representatives of several men’s national teams, not only the Republic of Ireland. The strong impressions drawn from these discussions is that the challenge of feeding elite-level footballers is two-fold and involves a balancing act of providing fuel to power athletes yet also food to please them – and thereby ensure they eat enough.

Hence the significance of a chef who travels with the team, according to Zoran Bahišačev, doctor of Croatia’s national side. He says: “You have to be aware that sports nutrition is boring and so the chef will make sure to give a special touch to the meals and make them more interesting for the players.”

Vegetarians welcome in Sweden

An obvious first step for any such chef is to ascertain which foods players wish to eat. In the case of Sweden, each player receives a questionnaire ahead of every get-together, allowing them to explain their preferences. Dale Reese, the squad’s medical and performance coordinator, elaborates: “With every player we look at what foods they can eat, what foods they can’t eat – if they are lactose-intolerant, glucose-intolerant, any allergies or things like that. We’ve got a list for whenever we’re discussing [orders] with the different hotels and airlines. This is our base.”

This year, he adds, the Swedes have added a vegetarian main course to every meal time “because there are three or

"Non-playing substitutes and goalkeepers have lower energy requirements than starting outfield players and they’re aware that their food intake needs to reflect this during camps."

Dan Horan
FAI head of football science and research
Winning ingredients

Former England full-back Lee Dixon remembers the impact of Arsène Wenger’s changes to his diet as an Arsenal player.

“It would be wrong to say we had a bad diet before Arsène came, but he looked at what we were eating pre-match and it was old-school food – chicken with fat on or olive oil; it was a boiled chicken. This was done pretty much overnight.

Before Arsène’s arrival, our doctor, John Crane, who was the England doctor as well, would come into the dressing room at half-time with a full meal on a tray. The food was cooked in an oven, and it was taken away and eaten immediately. The players would be hungry, but they didn’t mind, as long as they were full up. The food was always the same, and it was a bit of a chore for the kitchen staff.

With Arsène, things were different. He was very particular about the food we ate, and he wanted us to eat more vegetables and fruits. He also wanted us to eat smaller meals more frequently.

He told us that if we wanted to perform at our best, we needed to eat properly. He also wanted us to drink more water and eat more fruit and vegetables. He even had a personal trainer for us, and he would check our body weight and body composition on a regular basis.

Winning team?

Arsène was very particular about our body weight and body composition, and he would check our progress regularly. He also wanted us to eat more vegetables and fruits, and he even had a personal trainer for us. He believed that we needed to eat properly to perform at our best.

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We all followed his advice, and it helped us to perform better. We were all very happy with the way we were eating, and we felt more energetic and confident on the pitch.

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2012 to import fresh Irish meat to Poland via Germany. Players respond well to these ‘home comforts’ and it encourages players to eat the volumes of foods that are required to prepare for the intensities of international football.”

This is not just the case at tournaments, but at any international gathering, particularly involving players who play their club football elsewhere. “Many of our players play abroad so they have a wish for some Hungarian flavours,” says national team chef István Bodnár, albeit acknowledging this presents him with a test of his skills given the base of several popular dishes in Hungary: sausages, a sausage made by browning flour in oil. “For such food we apply cornstarch instead and balance the different flavour with saussages, we get the same taste but the food is prepared in a healthy way.”

The wish for the familiar taste of some home favourites is tempered by the task at hand too, Bodnár adds. “On day one, the meal is less strict and as we get closer to the match, it gets more and more healthy. We have more and more grilled food, prepared with plant-based ingredients.” Dale Reese observes similar cravings among the Swedish squad. “Our players all come from outside Sweden and when we have our gatherings they want as much as Swedish food as possible. It makes the players crazy happy.”

One favourite is beef Nyberg, a meat dish eaten with Swedish lingonberries. During the World Cup in Russia, through a problem arose with sourcing these berries. “We weren’t allowed to import them,” Reese says, which meant no lingonberries at their base in Gelendzhik on the Black Sea. “You should have seen how glad the players were when we got to St Petersburg [for the round of 16] and there we could get lingonberries. They had their lingonberries and that made their day.

This is not to say that footballers are never allowed to sample new dishes. Reese adds: “As long as our chef agrees it’s well done and it’s good, they’re happy, with some of the dinners that aren’t the day before or the day after a match, one of the main dishes will be a local dish that our chef approves, so yes we want them to try. The Russians, for example, made us a marvellous preserved apple juice that they combined with sparkling water and the guys just loved it, I don’t know how many litres went down!”

Planning ahead
No team wants to suffer the loss of a player to food poisoning, as happened, for instance, to England goalkeeper Gordon Banks at the 1970 World Cup in Mexico. A bottle of beer drunk at dinner the night before the quarter-final against West Germany left him doubled up with stomach cramps. England, with Peter Bonetti in goal, lost the match 3-2, having led 2-0 – an outcome that led Banks to later claim his drink had been spiked. When it comes to a major tournament, therefore, good cooperation with staff at the team hotel is essential. Zoran Bahtijarević explains how Croatia has ensured a smooth process in the past. “As we’re dealing directly with the hotels where we’re based, we give them the menus we set and they cooperate with their local suppliers to get all they need to prepare everything that’s on the menus. We always expect high-quality groceries and our chef on site is always checking that everything goes as planned.”

Each country has its own way of working, though Bodnár stresses the importance of only using fresh ingredients – never anything frozen – when feeding his Hungarian players. Sweden dispatch one of their two chefs a day in advance when leaving for their tournament base. Meanwhile, a three- strong Republic of Ireland delegation, including Dan Horan, chief Steve and team doctor Byrne visited their EURO 2016 hotel two days ahead of that tournament “to build relationships with the management and kitchen staff”, as Horan explains. He adds: “Our policy is to have meals ready for players ten minutes before the official meal time and that means that hotel staff need to understand the importance of timing and room preparation. The dining and snack rooms for players and staff are very important areas during a tournament because they spend so much time there.” Albelt loss Guiness these days.

“Our national team is mostly filled with very experienced players coming from top European clubs. Nobody could tell me that Luka Modric needs to be told what to eat. That’s why we’re following the system of minimum intervention.”

Dr Zoran Bahtijarević
Croatia’s national team doctor

The science of sports nutrition

Asker Jeukendrup is a professor of exercise metabolism at Loughborough University in England and acts as a performance consultant to Barcelona, RB Salzburg and PSV Eindhoven.

What is today’s scientific thinking regarding nutrition for footballers?

The studies show it is not just putting fuel in the body that’s important, but also that with the right fuels you can improve coordination skills, timing, decision-making – all those factors that are really important in football. Good coordination starts in the brain, so what do we need for optimal brain function and is there anything we can do with nutrition to optimise that brain function?

Carbohydrates, which you also need as fuel for the muscle, and caffeine are two things which will affect the brain. Caffeine can also have negative effects, depending on the dosing – if you have the right dose, you get real improvement in alertness and cognitive functioning; if you have too much, you become anxious and your heart rate goes up too much.

Looking at the lead-up to a match, what should a footballer be eating the day before?

It really is about making sure the energy stores are full, so 24 hours before you have to make sure you eat enough carbohydrates. It’s well known that you need carbs – pasta, rice, potato or bread are all good. Once digested, it is just glucose and the glucose will be stored. One thing about footballers is they always underestimate how much they have to eat. The day before, typically you’d be looking at eating around seven grams per kilogram of your body weight, when sleeping. When you wake up, therefore, the food you’ve eaten the night before has replenished the glycogen any more, you’ll need a breakfast that delivers enough carbohydrate to replenish what was there – a decent breakfast with a focus on carbohydrates, I’d be looking for around 100 grams. Whether it’s an afternoon or evening match, I’d then suggest eating the main meal three hours before kick-off, giving plenty of time to digest it. You want something easily digestible, as if it’s a steak then that steak would definitely still be sitting in your stomach during the match. You want a pasta or rice dish that is fully absorbed, so by the time the match is all that energy is now stored in the muscle.

How important is food intake after a match for recovery?

If a player has another match three days later, then they would want to start eating again immediately after the match. We are looking at between 70 and 90 grams of carbohydrates, which is a fair amount, especially as it’s not that easy to eat immediately after a match for most players. There are often solutions, like shakes with carbohydrate and protein.

And finally, how about treats – like something sweet or a glass of wine or beer?

In the recovery period especially, sugar is a perfect way to replenish your glycogen stores, so it would fit in fairly well with aggressive refuelling. The problem with cakes is they contain a lot of fats and energy that maybe you don’t necessarily need. Footballers still sometimes have a drink after the match – alcohol is okay if it’s occasional, but beer and wine have quite a lot of calories – almost twice as many as carbohydrates or sugar. One or two glasses now and then is not going to be a problem, but binge drinking is because that really affects recovery as well.
Elite football competitions are gradually resuming across Europe, even if behind closed doors and according to strict health regulations. How have trainers helped players maintain fitness during the long COVID-19 lockdown, and what challenges do they face in getting them match fit again? We ask the experts.

It was not training as they had known it. On 8 May, the day of the Barcelona squad’s return to their Ciutat Esportiva after 56 days, each player worked with a ball on his own. There was no chance for the usual chatter and laughter with team-mates, indeed not even a shower afterwards – the ‘zona de agua’ with its sauna, hydro-massage pool and Jacuzzi was strictly off limits. Instead, each player simply picked up a sealed bag containing his kit for the following day, got into his car and drove home. Yet there were no grumbles, no expressions of anxiety. “No, the complete opposite,” says Fran Soto, the first-team physical trainer. “They were delighted to get out again and be able to enjoy what they most like doing.”

For Lionel Messi and co, it was the week when they had been restored to training. Barcelona had entered the lockdown top of La Liga and still in contention in the UEFA Champions League. Because of this, says Soto, they “tried to simulate the micro-cycle of two games a week, with two peaks of workload, one during the week, the other at the end.”

Soto and his colleagues António Gómez and Edu Pons each took a group of “seven or eight players” whom they monitored, though they were wary of too rigorous an approach. “After discussing it and considering the profile of the players in question – players on the whole with vast experience and many years at the top – we decided in the end to leave them a bit more freedom and to allow them to disconnect a little,” he elaborates. “These are players who normally don’t have such prolonged periods of inactivity, without any competition. We even let them decide whether they wanted to do the sessions in the morning or evening depending on their family situation. The only thing we insisted on was getting their RPE [rating of perceived exertion] from the session so we could keep track of their workload.”

According to the fitness trainer at Ajax, Alessandro Schoenmaker, the first aim when establishing a programme for their players during the initial period at home was “to maintain the physical capacity that you lose very quickly – speed, power, strength. There was low-intensity training for central adaptations and high-intensity training for peripheral adaptations to try to reduce the detraining effect.” Each player had a Polar heart-rate monitor watch delivered to his home and this, together with a tracking app, meant a younger squad than Barcelona’s received closer monitoring. Schoenmaker explains: “Some of them went outside, running and biking, and other ideas we suggested. Others stayed at home as they didn’t want contact with people outside and used Wattbikes and training material provided. I could track them and see what they were doing and where, and gave them constant feedback.”

Vosse de Boode, the club’s head of sports science and data analytics, adds: “We knew when they were going for a run and how fast they ran. They had to upload it through their phone to us.” The technology was there and the data too, but De Boode observes, they were now working outside of the usual “micro-cycles” of matches. There was uncertainty “whether we had to go on”.

Fran Soto follows the protocol in a protective mask and gloves on Barcelona return to training.

“The way back”

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**The technician** – UEFA Direct – July/August 2020

**2**

Muscle mass. For those squad members give them five moments each day where protein, Tambeur explains. “We tried to much sport you need to eat less, but players think when you don’t do so intake, including from shakes. “Often a dietician on maintaining their protein (rather than daily as would be normal)

At Genk, for example, players had to provide weekly updates on their weight and who wasn’t,” notes one of the club’s psychologists. At Genk, the 2019 Belgian champions, whose players used a WhatsApp group to post videos of themselves carrying out their prescribed strength training. “They could see the other players who were doing it – and who wasn’t,” notes one of the club’s sport scientists, Roel Tambeur. The question of refuelling was another challenge for footballers no longer expending the usual amount of energy. At Genk, for example, there had to be provide weekly updates on their weight (rather than daily as would be normal) and received instructions from the club dietician on maintaining their protein intake, including from shakes. “Often players think when you don’t do so much sport you need to eat less, but it’s important you keep eating enough protein,” Tambeur explains. “We tried to give them five moments each day where they could take proteins to keep their muscle mass.” For those squad members living alone, there was a meal delivery service from the club. At Barcelona too, where some players have their own chefs, there was advice given on what foods to eat as well as instructions to spend enough time outdoors each day to maintain their vitamin D levels.

**Keeping mentally fit at home**

If that was players’ bodies, how about their minds? Joost Leenders, the Ajax psychologist, set up a “virtual locker room in a closed platform on Instagram” to talk about their individual struggles, Adds Leenders. Ajax made the headlines in the Netherlands when their players took on members of Team Jumbo-Visma, the Dutch cycling outfit, in a virtual race on the Zwift app. Leenders, who also works with the cyclists, had connected Ajax coach Erik ten Haag with the Team Jumbo-Visma management. “It was really good for them to discuss their struggles and learn from each other,” he says. Schoemaker, who assembled the Ajax squad was split into groups of eight, with each group assigned a staff member who liaised with them. There were small group chats on Zoom – “Just to stay in contact and talk about the lockdown, talk about struggles, insecurities, or about fun or creative things!” – while certain players required one-to-one conversations. “I had a lot of contact with four or five players to talk about their individual struggles,” adds Leenders. Ajax made the headlines in the Netherlands when their players took on members of Team Jumbo-Visma, the Dutch cycling outfit, in a virtual race on the Zwift app. Leenders, who also works with the cyclists, had connected Ajax coach Erik ten Haag with the Team Jumbo-Visma management. “It was really good for them to discuss their struggles and learn from each other,” he says. Schoemaker, who assembled the Ajax squad was split into groups of eight, with each group assigned a staff member who liaised with them. There were small group chats on Zoom – “Just to stay in contact and talk about the lockdown, talk about struggles, insecurities, or about fun or creative things!” – while certain players required one-to-one conversations. “I had a lot of contact with four or five players to talk about their individual struggles,” adds Leenders. Ajax made the headlines in the Netherlands when their players took on members of Team Jumbo-Visma, the Dutch cycling outfit, in a virtual race on the Zwift app. Leenders, who also works with the cyclists, had connected Ajax coach Erik ten Haag with the Team Jumbo-Visma management. “It was really good for them to discuss their struggles and learn from each other,” he says. Schoemaker, who assembled the Ajax team for this morale-boosting exercise, adds: “In the end we got eight players with five of their cyclists and one of our players beat them… only because he didn’t follow the instructions!”

Another perspective on players’ responses comes from Simon Clifford, an independent coach who works alongside several English league clubs, offering mentoring advice to individual players. In his conversations, he listened to some “with a point to prove, going at 110% and maybe doing extra stuff they shouldn’t do” and wondered whether they risked burnout before even returning to the training pitch.

Others he found less motivated. “Some aren’t used to working without somebody there watching and encouraging them or telling them, ‘That was good.’ When it went on, you had players asking, ‘Are we going to be back at all?’ I imagine some get used to a normality they’ve never had.” Yet with his younger players, in particular, he sensed an awareness of the opportunities that might arise with the resumption, with coaches likely to rotate squads more owing to fatigue. “They’re generally more robust and can play and train more and their recovery is less,” says Clifford. “The other thing is, if they were playing Under-23 football, it’s more or less behind closed doors, too, and that’s a factor.”

**The limitations of home training**

Whatever the levels of motivation, Clifford found his players were only able to do so much from home. “One of the biggest difficulties from the training aspect has been not being able to work with the ball and another player,” he said, noting that it was not just the pacing, receiving and shooting, but also “twisting and turning, and accelerating away from a man.” One suggestion he made, therefore, was a form of “shadow football”, involving moving and turning with the ball and some visualisation techniques.**The most important objectives from the physiological and biological side were to avoid a loss of muscle mass and to avoid a major detraining**

Victor Lafuente
Granada’s first-team physical trainer

**The injury risk**

What are the dangers of returning to football after a long pause and limited preparation time? Time alone will tell the impact on footballers’ bodies of the COVID-19 interruption and subsequent return to action, though Professor Jan Ekstrand, the IFA injury studies lead expert, has two hypotheses. “One is that it increases the injury risk, especially muscle injuries because detraining means they lose some of their fitness and it’s very difficult to keep the speed and match intensity during training, and especially if it’s individual training. Another hypothesis may be that maybe it decreases the injuries because the complaint from players for many years is they’ve never had enough time to recover and they’re fatigued.” He considers the former more likely.

Preventing the loss of muscle mass was one of the chief concerns of club fitness and conditioning staff during the pause, and Ekstrand noted that five players at Borussia Dortmund suffered muscle strain injuries in May. Moreover, according to data from the IFA and the Jena Institute of Sport Science, there were 0.88 injuries per game in the first round of matches when the Bundesliga resumed, compared with a pre-lockdown average of around 0.27. Ekstrand adds: “The most probable scenario is when you get back to matches like now in Germany, they’ll not be prepared for the intensity but will mentally be very fresh. The players will be very willing but the risk is that they’ll not be prepared in the muscles.”

Professor Werner Helsen has his own concerns, citing the example from American football of the abbreviated pre-season in 2011 following a 136-day lockdown. Players had just 17 days’ training before pre-season matches, and there were 12 Achilles tendon ruptures recorded in the first 29 days back, compared with only five ruptures per year in previous seasons. “On the restart both players and referees had a particular number of injuries of the lower limbs – in particular the Achilles and hamstring injuries – so the typical advice we’re giving is to prepare as best as possible and to focus in a proper way on strengthening the lower limbs,” says Helsen. “This is what we’re doing in online group training sessions, using weights or minibands to do resistance strength training at home.”

**Paul Balbi, head of performance at OH Leuven in Belgium, agrees.** “What happens with players not getting enough touches with the ball? How about the perception of the tactical decision-making?” In this respect, Genk offered one solution as they were already using an online training system with their players, MyMindWorks. One activity involves receiving a 3D animated football and passing it back while simultaneously carrying out a task on an iPad. For another, players perform mental arithmetic while touching a series of numbered cones with their foot. Such exercises are geared to improving mental, visual and cognitive parameters and are endorsed by Professor Werner Helsen from the University of Leuven, who works as a fitness expert with UEFA’s referees. He says of Genk’s approach: “They do it very often with players, for 15 minutes following a warm-up, and call it brain and body activation. It’s very challenging, and is something I picked up.”
Reflections on a sport interrupted

Positives taken and lessons learned

From Soto, Barcelona: “It has taken us out of our comfort zone and the daily routine we’d established... For those players with a family nucleus, who are so used to travelling and not being at home so much, it’s been an experience they’ve told us they’ve enjoyed.”

Alessandro Schoenmaker, Ajax: “I hope they develop a little bit more self-discipline. They had seven weeks where they had to train by themselves, look after themselves, listen to their bodies. I hope they’re more independent now, but you don’t know until they come back.”

Roel Tambeur, Racing Genk: “I’m a sports scientist and data analyst, but this has showed me that talking and communicating with each other is difficult to replace. The most important information you get off players is when you see them in the morning and ask, ‘How are you?’”

Vosse de Boode, Ajax: “Mary of the youth players get soreness from a combination of growth issues and the training load, but after this period, one of the youth doctors has mentioned that there are very few players that still have those issues.”

up from working with players and now also apply with referees. Cognitive loading is very important for players but also referees, who, when they run, need to remember which player to caution or not.”

Helsen, who has researched the benefits of motor imagery, has developed an app (perception4perfection.eu) which shows how much officials – along with car drivers, aeroplane pilots and even radiologists – can practise decision-making “under time pressure” using specific computer avatars. She argues: “At this stage video games are not really tailor-made to the possibilities of a specific player at elite level. Of course, you can watch videos and try to stimulate that part but it’s all suggestion and none of it proven.”

Nothing like the real thing

Of course, there is nothing like the real thing – the smell of the grass and its soft feel underfoot. At Barcelona, as the return loomed, players embarked on a series of mobility exercises – “Three times a day to counter the effects of sedenarianess,” says Soto – as well as “stress tests”, including “cold showers to get the body out of this state of comfort from being at home so long”. This was “not a normal pre-season”, he affirms, and not just for the absence of group training for the first ten days. It began with COVID-19 testing, and, as at every club, a measure of uncertainty over the condition of players. The usual process at this stage involves measuring baseline physical data and elements crucial to performance, including mobility and flexibility; power; speed and agility; reaction time; aerobic capacity; and cardiovascular health and function. Yet as De Boode says of her Ajax players: “No one really knows what this exact programme on a bike does to their football fitness.”

Happily, down in Granada, Lafuente found his players in decent shape, noting that “when a player turns up for pre-season, he arrives in a worse condition than that of the players who’ve come back now.” They had been encouraged to think about their game during the confinement.

The ultimate confinement

French astronaut Thomas Pesquet finds a couple of lessons for footballers from his six months in space.

“In a sense, the situation that’s been facing footballers is pretty similar to my time on the International Space Station in that it takes discipline to maintain your level of physical fitness during confinement, but you’re a professional – you deal with what you have, and it’s repetitive, but you have to do it because it’s your job. The only advice I’d give them is to take it slow when they come back. Sometimes you might not be fully aware of the consequences on your body. You think you’re fine but actually you haven’t been exposed to really extreme loads of exercise, to really fast-paced exercise.

With the push of two fingers, you can just float across the entire International Space Station, but the result of this is you lose quite a lot of muscle mass, especially in the thighs, legs, back muscles – all those muscles that you train every day without even realizing it, just standing or sitting or walking. We have a special bike, without the saddle because we’re floating, but with pedals. We do the equivalent of weightlifting too – a lot of squats and deadlifts over the course of a mission, a space exercise with air pressure simulating the weights, and that’s every single day for an hour and a half. We have a treadmill too, which we are attached to with a belt around our waist and air pressure simulating the weights. In total, it’s two and a half hours every day to keep the muscle mass pretty stable, though there are some areas in which you still lose something, particularly the deep back muscles around your spine. The spine doesn’t need to be supported and so those muscles tend to relax, to atrophy, and you lose also some bone density because you’re not being subjected to gravity.

I was up there for six months and I lost weight, partly because of the muscle loss and also because the food isn’t great up there and you feel full very quickly – the food floats in your digestive system. I lost seven kilos in the first two months, which is not unexpected, and then with exercise and better alimentation for the rest of the mission, I ended up maybe three or four kilos less than I’d been when we landed. Aside from food, we take vitamin D with every meal because we’re inside all the time and so missing exposure to the sun.

We have our challenges when we return to Earth too. One thing to make sure of is to get your balance right because your inner ear is very impacted by weightlessness: your brain adapts your balance system and you very may well lose your balance back on Earth so there are exercises like walking in a straight line. Indeed there’s a whole programme for three months. Your spatial awareness changes too. You’ve been used to a two-dimensional environment for your entire life really and then suddenly you’re in this space station where just by flipping yourself upside down; it’s a whole new environment so you get much more stimuli to your nervous system and your coordination and spatial orientation.

We do exercises involving catching different balls that are thrown at you in different orders. Depending on the number and colour of the ball, you have to turn to your right and catch it with your left hand, or turn to your left and catch it with your right hand. When you come back from a mission, you’re actually better at this because your brain has rewired itself and you’re more aware of your three-dimensional surroundings, so I think these exercises could really apply to football. You can’t send all the football players to space, but if you could they would come back maybe a tiny bit better!”

Bayern reserve goalkeeper Christian Fruhrtt is stretched to the limit as the German champions out on the grass.

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lockdown, with weekly video analysis sessions with head coach Diego Martinez on “movement, strategy, tactics”, and the first sessions back involved a mix of football and fitness work. “Apart from the conditioning aspect we tried to include habits of play like their body shape when receiving the ball quality of pass, of movement. It was conditioning and power and prevention but also the habits of play that we consider important.” With a guiding principle of “sensible progression”, week two, for instance, involved the following sequence: three days featuring a “heavy session”, a recovery day, another “heavy session”, and then a rest day. It is worth adding that Lafuente had limited his players to “only 15-20 minutes maximum” of jogging when Spain’s tight shutdown was first eased to allow outdoor exercise. This was to avoid “stress on the joint and tendons”, and for the same reason “jump protocols and force-velocity specific neuromuscular load, like kicking, change of direction, high-speed running. If you don’t do that, the chance of an injury would be too high.”

When Ajax returned, the head of the club’s medical staff, Dr Niels Wijne, had the same concerns touched on above: “neuro-muscular tiredness” and a potential overload for the tendons and ligaments. With the Eredivisie cancelled, Schoenmaker and his colleagues prepared a three-week programme. “Some had still done a little bit of football but it wasn’t training in the normal environment,” he says. “It was already announced the season was finished so it was more for the mental side – to get them back to the club, see the coaches, smell the grass, put the boots on and train.”

The Ajax squad began a fresh four-week break from the training ground on 18 May, with a training programme to follow in that period, though those foreign players unable to leave the Netherlands during the summer in their resumed domestic competitions. A series of August friendly matches should help. “Teams that have been playing are a lot better prepared for not only the physical load but also the quickness of the game,” De Boode adds. For Barcelona, Pare has been a different challenge – restarting a season at the business end, with the twin incentives of competing for La Liga and the UEFA Champions League. “We’re going to play it all in a short period of time with a very intense level of competition with two games a week and every match like a final,” says Soto. Ideally, there will be an opportunity to “lower the level of activity” between the domestic season ending and the UEFA Champions League’s planned resumption in August. “It’ll be a case of keeping things ticking over,” he adds, speaking before confirmation came of the 7/8 August date for Barcelona’s rescheduled Round of 16 second leg against Napoli. A relief no doubt after the “uncertainty” which “made us reflect on everything.” Soto’s words but a sentiment all will agree with.

“…if you’ve not been playing games for a long time, your system will have to adapt again, not only in terms of the quickness of your body, but also the quickness of the game and your decision-making and pattern recognition.”
Asking readers to define the role of UEFA’s technical observers might invite a few picturesque answers. Whereas ‘referee observer’ is a label that can be clearly read, UEFA’s menu of FAQ could easily include ‘What does a technical observer observe?’ or even ‘What exactly is a technical report?’ The most concise response to both queries would be ‘they analyse the proceedings from a coaching perspective’ even though, these days, the role has expanded beyond tactical analysis to embrace the tasks of selecting MVPs, team and player of the tournament, best goals and, in the two major men’s UEFA club competitions, a goal of the week.

Although members of the Technical Committee had previously contributed to tournament reviews, UEFA technical reports really kicked off at EURO ’96 when UEFA covered coaching aspects of the tournament in England with a team of five observers: Gérard Houllier, Daniel Jaureguiberry, Rinus Michels, Tommy Svensson and Roy Hodgson. The former Switzerland and England national team manager, currently at the helm at Crystal Palace, reminisces: “It was a good group of observers and we took the role very seriously, trying to pick out the most relevant aspects and make sense of what we were seeing. And, basically, the role hasn’t changed that much over the years. It’s still about producing a technical report that serves the purpose of passing on observations to people who are not so close to the tournament or might not have the same level of expert knowledge. With all due modesty, I think we did that successfully, offering analytical information and useful insights. I thought it was a very, very positive thing to do.”

As a random symptom of the game’s evolution, eight of the participants at that first 16-team final tournament implemented man-marking and operated with a libero – a role which, as subsequent technical reports have traced, has been handed to goalkeepers, whose ability with the feet has steadily gained relevance and permeated UEFA’s age-limit tournaments – to the extent that the technical report on the 2015 European Under-21 finals pointed out that goalkeeper Marc André ter Stegen had, in many matches, delivered more passes than any other German player.

The way to success
“Over the years”, Hodgson reflects, “the technical reports have tried to pinpoint the aspects that were helping to make teams successful. Athletic qualities have evolved; formations have gone through 4-4-2 or three-at-the-back periods. And there have been knock-on benefits. For example, the technical reports on the EUROS, the Champions League and the Europa League are really useful to spark discussion when UEFA gets the top coaches together for the Elite Club Coaches Forum or a national coaches conference, and a lot of ideas have been implemented. Another thing I’d like to emphasise is that, while financial and marketing aspects of the game were evolving really quickly, the technical side was not very well covered. So the technical reports have been positive in highlighting the coaching aspects of the game.”

“It doesn’t require an eagle’s eye to spot that all our technical reports relate to national teams. Then we realised that it was incongruous to overlook Europe’s premier club competition.” Those were

THE COACHING CASCADE
Over the last 25 seasons, UEFA has published more than 130 technical reports on its club and national team competitions, based on input from top coaches who have acted as technical observers. If put together as a compendium, the reports add up to a technical/tactical legacy and provide a fascinating insight into the evolution of the European game over the last quarter-century.
The most rewarding thing is to discuss so many things with a group of football people who have different opinions and ways of seeing things.”

David Moyes
UEFA technical observer

The words of former UEFA president Lennart Johansson in his preface to the first UEFA Champions League report, which appeared after Manchester United’s epic victory over FC Bayern München in Barcelona 1999. During the first decade of the new millennium, coverage of age-limit tournaments gathered momentum – as did the competitions themselves.

Technical reports on the UEFA Europa League appeared soon after its metamorphosis from the old UEFA Cup, and, as these days, technical observers are on squad lists for the full spectrum of UEFA’s club and national team competitions. Reporting on the club competitions is a different ball game. With fixtures dotted all over the map, technical observers become lone wolves who report on individual matches and only meet their colleagues at the final – a scenario that generates challenges in terms of collating material and detecting overall trends. By contrast, a final tournament allows observers to strike sparks off each other on a daily basis – an aspect of the job they relish. David Moyes, technical observer at EURO 2016 and the 2010 UEFA Nations League finals, as well as for UEFA Champions League matches, comments: “The most rewarding thing is to discuss so many things with a group of football people who have different opinions and ways of seeing things. For example, everybody likes to discuss topics like change-footed wingers and the impact they have on your attacking patterns. It’s really good to be part of that and I’ve brought information and ideas back from both the EURO and the Nations League. And I think the ideas you get from watching the amazing coaching at top level can be exploited all the way down to junior teams.”

From the top to the bottom

Cascading information from the top to the bottom of the game is the raison d’être of the technical report. John Peacock, champion of Europe with England’s Under-17s and a regular UEFA technical observer, comments: “As someone who has been fortunate to manage national development teams and oversee coach education in England, I always found the role of technical observer complemented that really well. You can bring back the findings and use the skills acquired in both domains. Observing UEFA youth finals has helped identify trends, see promising talent and relate this back to top-level senior football. And tournament football is different – effectively managing a number of games over a short period is a skill. I like to observe how teams and coaches overcome this issue and balance results against development while giving younger players opportunities to showcase themselves within a pressure situation. If we relate this to coach education it takes into account all aspects of technical/tactical, physical, psychological and social components – all the major ingredients for a top player or coach.”

It could easily be argued that cascading information via the technical reports has had even greater relevance in the fast-growth sectors of women’s football and futsal. Sweden’s Anna Signeul, a long-standing technical observer currently in charge of the Finland women’s national team and the coach who led Scotland to a first-ever final tournament appearance at Women’s EURO 2017 feels the technical reports have been “important for many reasons. As a historical tool for the development of the game by plotting trends and developments. As a learning tool for everyone working in the game at senior and youth levels and as an educational tool to stimulate discussion and catalyse analysis and debate, as well as promoting further investment into the game. As an observer, a EURO is a huge learning experience and I felt that EURO 2013, when it was expanded to 12 teams, was a great step forward.”

Her sentiment is echoed by Finland’s Jarmo Mattiainen, UEFA’s record holder in coverage of men’s and women’s competitions when his duties with the national teams of Finland, Wales, Canada and currently Estonia have permitted. “Witnessing the growth and development at that tournament was inspirational and our group of technical observers was very forward-thinking. The mindset was always about improving technical reports and making them better for all coaches to use.” Hope Powell, regular technical observer and former medalist at that tournament as manager of England in 2009, comments: “I like to believe that the reports have contributed to the development of the game and I hope that aspiring as well as seasoned coaches get insights so that knowledge can be shared from a coach education standpoint. As an observer, it makes me continually wonder what I would do in that particular situation – it challenges my thinking!”

From pens to tablets

Way back in 2006, benchmarks were laid in the UEFA Champions League with the introduction of tracking technology based on two banks of cameras installed high in the stands. These days, this has evolved into advanced image processing technology to capture and deliver (at a high-resolution data rate of 25 points per second) real-time tracking data on the movements of each player, the referees and the ball. This makes performance data, such as distance run, speed, acceleration, stamina, team formations and set plays instantly available for play-by-play video analysis and graphics production, all of which gives added value to the technical reports. For the technical observers, such as the men’s and women’s age-limit tournaments, the technical observers’ impressions are supported – or even shaped – by data gathering based on a trio of analysts using bespoke software that overlays a live video feed on a pitch graphic. Each team is monitored by one person, while the third operates in a data-checking role. Using a combination of hot key and mouse clicks, they track who is on the ball and what happens to it, with post-match yielding between 1,600 and 2,000 individual pieces of data. For the technical observers, match coverage has been a story of transition from pens and notepads to tablets and tagging apps that allow the observer to make notes on the match electronically and highlight key moments. Post-match, the tags are then synced to the video, enabling them to view the tags or video clips while writing their match report. They can also use a smartphone or smartwatch for key moments. Today’s observer can also have access to a virtual vantage point that gives the best view of key shapes and tactical patterns.
**A didactic document**

Jorge Brat, current champion of Europe as head coach of Portugal’s futbal team, thinks along similar lines. “UEFA’s technical reports are very important documents in the analysis and evaluation of the major competitions that are the main references to understand the state of the sport, and the evolutionary trend of the game. The reports are prepared by coaches with enormous experience, who know how to analyse the most relevant information. The documentation, illustrations and detailed analysis of what happens, are very important for young coaches – a didactic document revealing the dynamics of the best European teams. Keeping up with the ideologies of the coaches of the main national teams in Europe, analysing all the details, is mandatory for me and my own technical team.” Orlando Duarte, UEFA technical observer at Futsal EURO 2018.

“We tried to offer as much information as possible but my one wish would be to add even more visual material – to illustrate or animate the key tactical issues.”

Orlando Duarte
UEFA technical observer at Futsal EURO 2018

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**New tools**

Highlight harmonies with UEFA’s song sheet. Historically, technical reports have tried to support observers’ views with statistical evidence even though, in the pioneering days, data were rudimentary. And plans to enhance technical reports have sometimes been frustrated by fundamentals, such as lack of quality footage from age-limit tournaments. “Even so, the evolution of the technical reports has been remarkable,” says Matikainen. “The associations that I have worked for use the reports for coach education, player development, club development and overall football development in various ways. The tools for observation, analysis and synthesis have become more advanced and that opens new angles for reports. They give us more material but the selection and editing processes are still the key elements.

At this point, it might be worth mentioning the unusually prolific use of quotation marks on these pages. But words about UEFA’s technical reports are useful for coach education courses. UEFA technical reports are, together with our own analyses, a vital and very appreciated part of our work among coach educators.”

Or, “Thanks to UEFA! Modern football fundamentals are of key importance for conveying the content in adapted form in our more advanced coach education courses. UEFA technical reports are, together with our own analyses, a vital and very appreciated part of our work among coach educators.”

**A dedicated website**

That was in the autumn of 2017. Since then, a refurbishment scheme has gathered momentum. A library of technical reports is being built on the uefatechnicalreports.com platform. A specialised match analyst has been drafted into the core team in Nyon. And, in addition to the broad-brush-stroke analysis of playing systems, goal-scoring patterns, set plays, goalkeeping, counter-attacking, roles of full-backs, change-footed wingers and so on, reports have set out to illustrate match moments that the observers have pinpointed as interesting from a coaching perspective.

At the same time, technology has moved on – and UEFA is exploiting it to upgrade data content and inject video links into reports to illustrate salient technical/tactical features. Without delving too deeply into IT aspects, technical observers are now starting to operate with tablets and mobile apps that allow them to immediately dip game situations that catch the eye as potentially significant. After the game, they have access to multiple camera angles – broadcast images, tactical and behind-goal footage, which can be injected into the technical report. The video clips can then be enhanced with state-of-the-art visualisation tools to overlay tactical graphics in an informative way which adds visual support to the points the observer wants to highlight. Back at the hotel – or even on the way there – observers can view the clips they have created, along with match data collected during the game, from numbers of passes, shots or crosses to more advanced data on distances covered, maximum speeds or average positional locations on the field of play – deceptively support material for topics the mods operandi of wing-backs, for example. During a high-intensity tournament like next year’s rearranged EURO 2020, with multiple games per day, this sort of rapid access to video and data will open up more time for tactical analysis, debate and, by comparing with previous competitions, looking at trends within the game as a whole and offering a more complete picture to coaches and coach educators via material which, it is hoped, can give added value to coach education courses.

“...and to a corporate media release with ego-trip undertones. Hence the emphasis on other people’s comments – to the extent that UEFA conducted a survey among national associations at a coach education conference in Belfast, where the usefulness of UEFA’s technical reports received a vote of confidence via a rating of 87/100. This was an optimal result: a strongly positive response with room for improvement.”

A voice from Sweden, for example, underlined “the importance of being able to convey the content in adapted form in our more advanced coach education courses.”

**“The technical reports have evolved in a positive way and statistics are a good tool to see how football is changing. The possibility to illustrate analysis with video clips is, of course, a good step forward.”**

Lars Lagerbäck
Norway’s national team coach

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**The technical observers at the UEFA Europa League Final between Marseille and Atletico on 15 May 2018 in Lyon. Left to right: Milanko Alimovic, Jerzy Dzikiu, Max Paeckelmann, Thomas Schub, Ghnecdie Scuduri, Stefan Majewski, Lars Lagerbäck, Frank K. Ludolph.**
goals, goals, goals. The 2019/20 UEFA Champions League saw an unprecedented flow of them. There were some stunning scorelines – not least 8-2 and 7-2 wins for eventual champions FC Bayern München – and a total of 386 goals struck across 119 matches. There had been more scored in the 2017/18 season but that total of 401 goals came from 125 matches; the COVID-affected 2019/20 campaign had six fewer fixtures and thus concluded with a goals-per-game ratio of 3.24 – the UEFA Champions League’s highest since its current format was established.

The rush of goals meant a fall in scoreless draws to four – the lowest since 1998/99 – and with the UEFA Europa League mirroring the pattern with just seven stalemates in its 197 games (only one in the knockout rounds), UEFA’s end-of-term technical reports had one very pressing question to reflect on: why all the goals?

According to Roberto Martínez, the Belgium coach and one of UEFA’s team of technical observers who helped produce the reports, this surfeit of goals was the result of a “trend of global football” involving coaches favouring a high-pressing, high-risk attacking strategy. It was not hard to find examples in 2019/20: consider the UEFA Champions League newcomers from Italy, Atalanta BC, who played one v one across the pitch and conceded 18 goals on an exciting run to the last eight. Among the 16 clubs in the UEFA Champions League knockout rounds, Martínez noted that only Club Atlético de Madrid and Olympique Lyonnais employed a counterattacking approach, while Cosmin Contra, another of UEFA’s team of observers, put it more bluntly: “Now teams play in the other half and this leaves space at the back.”

If football in 2020 is part of the entertainment business, as another technical observer reflected, the desire showed by coaches to meet expectations of attractive football, playing out from the back and through the thirds, brings a clear element of risk. Gareth Southgate, the England coach and UEFA observer, reflects in the UEFA Champions League technical report that: “If you don’t get it absolutely spot on, they’ll play through you and you’re in trouble.” Indeed that risk was exacerbated in 2019/20 with it being the first season when goalkeepers could play a goal kick short to a teammate in the penalty box, and their success or otherwise with this new play was another topic analysed in the reports.

INVESTIGATING THE TRENDS

The UEFA Champions League and UEFA Europa League technical reports offer an analysis of the key trends and statistical findings identified in 2019/20, starting with a rare flood of goals…

Unfamiliar final formats

“While there were two familiar names etched into the respective trophies at the end of 2019/20 – with Bayern’s sixth European Cup/UEFA Champions League title and Sevilla FC’s sixth UEFA Cup/UEFA Europa League success – UEFA’s technical reports dwelt too on the highly unfamiliar backdrop against which both competitions concluded following the spring lockdown.

“Try to imagine in the theatre, actors trying to perform to empty chairs,” says the technical observer from Poland, Jerzy Engel, in the UEFA Europa League technical report. Yet more than one observer felt that the Paris-Saint Germain players, for example, profited from the altered format by finding a focus and intensity which helped them reach their first UEFA Champions League final. They also considered the impact of one-off matches rather than the customary two-legged ties – something, says Southgate, that allowed for “more possibility for unusual results.” That said, according to another of the observers quoted, Israel coach Willi Ruttensteiner, the format with which the old season ended, while enjoyable, should be a one-off: “With these knockout matches, there’s a decision on the day, so it’s exciting, but I think of the full stadiums and home and away games and what it means to the clubs.”
Sevilla achieved a spectacular effect.

A successful pressing game entails striking the right balance between risk and reward, something that Bayern and Sevilla achieved to spectacular effect.

The 2020 UEFA Champions League technical report details how high pressing carries a degree of risk, but that it can also bring with it ample reward. With UEFA Europa League winners Sevilla also striking it rich with a competition lead by their high press. The Bavarians transformed three high turnovers into goals, turning over 27% of all these turnovers into a shot. Even when they found the target, their 31 high turnovers only transformed three high turnovers into a goal. With their persistent press and this could well have contributed to Tottenham's worst pass accuracy for the season (70%), coming from their lowest number of passes (297) in a single UEFA Champions League game last season. The fact they covered more ground in their 3-1 defeat in Munich (115 km) than in any other game they played in Europe last season showed how much less Mourinho's men were effectively chasing shadows against a disciplined and organised Bayern who, despite frequently regaining possession in advanced positions, nevertheless followed the global trend of taking longer and needing more passes to score – 13.84 seconds and 4.21 passes compared with 9.81 seconds and 2.94 passes in the previous season.

Stilling Barca, which ranked in the top five in each of the categories of 358 short passes (ranked third across the competition), from a combined average of 639 passes attempted (third) and an 87% accuracy (fifth), was also the result of another trend observed in the UEFA Champions League last season, that of the growing threat provided by wing-backs. Alphonso Davies and Joshua Kimmich excelled in this added dimension of Bayern's high press, combining for one of Bayern's eight goals against Barcelona.

Bayern were not by any means alone in attempting to win possession back in the final third, though their efficiency was unrivalled. The 2019 semi-finalists AFC Ajax, for example, allowed fewer passes to their opponents than any other club before intervening in a bid to win the ball back, their average of 7.5 marginally better than Bayern’s 7.8. However, as can be seen, their 31 high turnovers only led to four shots on goal, none of which found the target. MeansFlick, Liverpool FC had led the way in 2019, yet they struggled to sustain the same sort of success in trying to defend their title, with just eight shots coming from their 41 high turnovers. The Reds followed Bayern and preceded Manchester City FC for PPDA (Passes Allowed per Defensive Action), confirming their willingness to press and to press in all areas of the field, as part of their coach Jürgen Klopp’s pursuit of Gegenpressing perfection.

Interestingly, Ajax exhibited an even more impressive PPDA following their shift across to the UEFA Europa League in the round of 32, allowing opponents 1.42 shots on goal an average of just 6.78 passes before attempting a tackle. This was more than one pass fewer than the next hungriest side to win back the ball, Eintracht Frankfurt, and almost two fewer than champions Sevilla. Once again, the difference lay in the effectiveness, with Ajax scoring just twice and failing at that first Europa League hurdle, while Sevilla – with four goals and ten more shots coming from their 73 high turnovers – picked up the ultimate prize. “Sevilla’s high press was excellent; they really had the best team performance,” said Thomas Schaaf, underlining how the Andalusians had excelled in efficiency.

Efficiency is considered a stereotypically German trait, and Bayern showed there is a degree of truth to that presumption with their peerless press. The Bavarians transformed three high turnovers into goals, turning over 27% of all these turnovers into a shot. Even when they led FC Barcelona 6-2 in their historic victory over Tottenham Hotspur FC from 58.6% possession and that 8-2 win over Liverpool led to four shots on goal, none of which could be seen, their 31 high turnovers only transformed three high turnovers into a goal.

“Defend together as a team, collectively, against the ball, not just individually.”

Bayern’s collective improvement could also be seen in their possession statistics, with a rise from their average of 57% in 2018/19 to 64% on their way to the title – second only to Klopp’s Liverpool. Yet here again, the way Bayern used their possession gives perhaps a greater indication of how and why they lifted the trophy in Lisbon. Indeed, the two games in which they had the least possession resulted in their biggest wins, with a 7-2 victory over Tottenham Hotspur FC from 58.6% possession and that 8-2 win over Barcelona from their lowest share of just 49.3% – the only time they had less of the ball than their opponents. They were nevertheless actively pursuing the ball with their persistent press and this could well have contributed to Tottenham’s worst pass accuracy for the season (70%), coming from their lowest number of passes (297) in a single UEFA Champions League game last season.

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The most productive teams were certainly paid off. The UEFA Champions League match. Roberto Martínez wondered whether the wish to work now ranks on the list of coaches’ priorities – not least after a season which, setting the standard 

In a season when the changed goal-kick rule brought a fresh challenge for goalkeepers, Manuel Neuer stood out for his assured footwork. 

The expanded range of a goalkeeper’s 

With the sweeper-keeper phenomenon now firmly established, a significant change in the rules added yet another aptitude to the job description of a modern-day goalkeeper during the 2019/20 campaign. Perhaps fittingly, it was Bayern’s Manuel Neuer – arguably a pioneering figure in what has become a stable norm of goalkeepers featuring more and more frequently as auxiliary defenders – who lifted the UEFA Champions League trophy this time. With six clean sheets, Neuer was unbeatable in more than half the games he played, resulting in a joint-best average of 0.7 goals conceded per game. This only partially explains why the German custodian’s contribution to Bayern’s sixth elite continental crown was so substantial, however. His assistant coach noted that he did even more of his talking with the ball at his feet, and his words were duly delivered poetically. 

“Not every goalkeeper is like Neuer, who’s fabulous with his feet,” commented technical observer Génesis Mélíndez. That comes in particularly handy when goalkeepers are now allowed to pass the ball short to a teammate inside their own penalty area – or, as FC Internazionale Milano often did, receive the ball short from a defender taking the goal kick. In the UEFA Champions League, only Dinamo Zagreb’s Dominik Livaković – who consequently had the highest average pass distance from goal kicks – did not fare well in a new rule which enabled six goals to be scored after a short goal kick had been taken. He was an outlier, though, with beaten finalists Paris Saint-Germain leading in taking 45% of their goal kicks short, with Bayern just behind SSC Napoli (43%) in third place with 42%. In the UEFA Europa League, Inter relied on this outlet an average of 24 times, with two thirds of Samir Handanović’s goals kicks going no further than the perimeter of his own penalty area. “It’s a good rule and can be very effective, but you’ve got to work on it,” said technical observer and former Republic of Ireland goalkeeper Packie Bonner. Indeed, for all its benefits of being able to construct attacks from deep, potentially unlocking width in and creating space higher up the field, comes the caveat of losing the ball in very dangerous territory if things do go wrong. “With pressing so high, a lot of the time there are more mistakes by goalkeepers,” cautioned Mélíndez. The expanded range of a goalkeeper’s options from goal kicks added a new dimension to their game, with those 

Neuer sets the standard

In a season when the changed goal-kick rule brought a fresh challenge for goalkeepers, Manuel Neuer stood out for his assured footwork. 

With the sweeper-keeper phenomenon now firmly established, a significant change in the rules added yet another aptitude to the job description of a modern-day goalkeeper during the 2019/20 campaign. Perhaps fittingly, it was Bayern’s Manuel Neuer – arguably a pioneering figure in what has become a stable norm of goalkeepers featuring more and more frequently as auxiliary defenders – who lifted the UEFA Champions League trophy this time. With six clean sheets, Neuer was unbeatable in more than half the games he played, resulting in a joint-best average of 0.7 goals conceded per game. This only partially explains why the German custodian’s contribution to Bayern’s sixth elite continental crown was so substantial, however. His assistant coach noted that he did even more of his talking with the ball at his feet, and his words were duly delivered poetically. “Not every goalkeeper is like Neuer, who’s fabulous with his feet,” commented technical observer Génesis Mélíndez. That comes in particularly handy when goalkeepers are now allowed to pass the ball short to a teammate inside their own penalty area – or, as FC Internazionale Milano often did, receive the ball short from a defender taking the goal kick. In the UEFA Champions League, only Dinamo Zagreb’s Dominik Livaković – who consequently had the highest average pass distance from goal kicks – did not fare well in a new rule which enabled six goals to be scored after a short goal kick had been taken. He was an outlier, though, with beaten finalists Paris Saint-Germain leading in taking 45% of their goal kicks short, with Bayern just behind SSC Napoli (43%) in third place with 42%. In the UEFA Europa League, Inter relied on this outlet an even greater number of times, with two thirds of Samir Handanović’s goal kicks going no further than the perimeter of his own penalty area. “It’s a good rule and can be very effective, but you’ve got to work on it,” said technical observer and former Republic of Ireland goalkeeper Packie Bonner. Indeed, for all its benefits of being able to construct attacks from deep, potentially unlocking width in and creating space higher up the field, comes the caveat of losing the ball in very dangerous territory if things do go wrong. “With pressing so high, a lot of the time there are more mistakes by goalkeepers,” cautioned Mélíndez. The expanded range of a goalkeeper’s options from goal kicks added a new dimension to their game, with those
more capable with their feet, such as Neuer – who completed 98% of his passes, 77% of his shots, 98% of his key passes, and 85% of his long ball attempts. To combine their qualities with the intelligence to decide when to go short and when, such as under a particularly high press, it is safer to go long. In Neuer’s case, only once did he send the ball into the opposition half, twice seeking a winger or an advanced full-back, but more frequently playing short-to-mid-range passes, such as the Bayern No1. He had the lowest average pass distance from goal kicks. Compare this with Paris custodian Keylor Navas, who attempted short with long kicks and rarely attempted to find a teammate just outside his own area, and the contrasting ways the new rule can be interpreted were evidenced by both goalkeepers.

At the other end of the spectrum, Manchester City goalkeeper Ederson preferred to go long for several reasons, his excellent distribution being one of them. With two false Notts in Kevin De Bruyne and Bernardo Silva in their fixture with Real Madrid CF, for example, he had two more valid reasons for trying to get the ball to their feet directly. “An interesting feature was the opportunity to leave two v two situation from a simple long pass from Ederson,” commented Roberto Martínez.

Ederson only played a goal kick within his own penalty area 12 times. Handanović had already played that many short passes in just 24 minutes of Inter’s final four fixtures in the UEFA Europa League, with an average of one every four minutes as he led the way in embracing the rule change. Inter head coach Antonio Conte, who has previous defensive buildup from his days as Italy manager, turned this tactic into one of his side’s preferred attacking approaches. Like with Neuer and Ederson, this is possible thanks to the Slovenian’s confidence on the ball. “You never have the feeling that he’s nervous,” said technical observer Thomas Schaaf. Instead, Handanović always appeared to be in control, understanding when it was too risky to play a short pass, or sensing when the time was right to seek the likes of Romelu Lukaku or Ashley Young with a long ball, once the required space in midfield had been successfully created. Thinking and reading the game more like an outfield player is the latest step in a progression which is seeing goalkeepers become increasingly integral members of their teams, not just in preventing goals, but in plying the way for them to be scored at the other end.

GOALSCORING

How the goals were scored
Croissants and cutbacks were an important source of goals in the 2019/20 UEFA Champions League.

After the dust had settled on the rat-a-tat of goals in the 2019/20 UEFA Champions League, the specifics of how the goals were scored was a matter for analysis for UEFA’s technical observers. The analysis in the ensuing technical report identified crosses and cutbacks as the most productive route to goal for teams in the 2019/20 competition, yielding 113 goals or 29.3% of the total, while the proportion was even higher – 34.67% – in the Europa League, with 190 goals scored from such an outlet.

The top scorers Bayern scored 11 of their 43 goals from crosses, including Kingsley Coman’s final winner from a pinpoint ball by Joshua Kimmich, while Paris Saint-Germain’s Real Madrid and Dinamo Zagreb each struck six times. In the case of Madrid, crosses (six) and cutbacks (four) brought ten of their 16 goals – including Rodríguez’s centre for Karim Benzema’s fine header at Manchester City.

For Dinamo, crosses were the source of 60% of their ten goals – including Dani Olmo’s brilliant over-the-shoulder volley against Manchester City. The next most popular routes to goal were combinations (51 goals) followed by shots from outside the box (38), through balls (21) and goals from defensive errors (26). The fact that Bayern scored five goals from opposition mistakes could well be read as a result of the pressure they put on rival players by pushing high up the pitch. On combinations, Barcelona and Manchester City respectively scored four and five goals in this fashion – or 27% and 23.8% of their totals. Quién Barcelona’s playing style, it is no surprise they should be producing long passing sequences; they averaged 18.07 seconds on the ball before scoring, and even Lionel Messi’s fabulous individual strike against Napoli – the UEFA observer’s choice as Goal of the Tournament – was preceded by 21 passes. Overall, the average number of passes in the lead-up to goals reached a nine-year high of 4.24, while the average time in possession before scoring exceeded 13 seconds for the first time in this period. Even Liverpool have modified their approach: Julian Nagelsmann’s men averaged 12.8 passes before scoring – quite a difference from the 7.6 passes recorded on their path to the 2018 final – and this reflected the more patient approach which left the Reds with the highest average possession rate per match (67.1%). Of course, there are always exceptions.

As already noted above, Lyon played a countering game which mapped impressive reward in the quarter-final against Man City. Overall the Ligue 1 side averaged just 1.9 passes and 6.6 seconds before scoring, and according to Roberto Martínez, who observed their victory over City, it was striking “how well they can counterattack, quickly and with a lot of threat with the two strikers and arrivals from deep of [Maxwell Cornet and Houssem Aouar].”

In the UEFA Europa League too, it was common to see a patient build-up from sides, reflected by the fact there were only nine goals scored following counterattacks involving no more than three passes. Winners Sevilla sought out openings with plenty of switches and player movement: one goal against F91 Dudelange involved 20 passes while Olivier Torres’s spectacular overhead kick against Qarabag FK followed a 37-pass sequence lasting 95 seconds.

There were other examples noted in the competition’s technical report. Quarter-finalists Wolverhampton Wanderers scored three times at the end of 16-pass sequences, Arsenal held onto the ball for 58 seconds, meanwhile, before Joe Willock struck against R. Standard de Liège. Anything Arsenal do, incidentally, their local rivals Tottenham try to do better, and in the UEFA Champions League. Spurs scored a goal at Crvena zvezda through Christian Eriksen after keeping possession for 74 seconds.

Finally, a word on the timing of goals in the 2019/20 club competitions. It was striking to note the sheer number of late goals, struck during the closing stages when tired limbs were resulting in spaces opening up. Counting all the goals struck from the 76-minute mark to the end of added time in the UEFA Champions League, there were 95 in total, which represented almost a quarter of the overall number (24.6%).

Scoring the first goal was another taking point in the technical reports, given the percentage of games in which the team breaking the deadlock managed to avoid defeat – 88.1% in the case of the UEFA Champions League. Across the UEFA Europa League campaign, the side who struck first won on 63.5% of occasions, while in the knockout stage, that figure rose to 70.4%. Hence it was to Sevilla’s credit that they came from behind to win both their semi-final against Manchester United and final against Inter. By contrast, in the UEFA Champions League final tournament in Lisbon, there was just one match in which the team that conceded first recovered to win – namely, Paris Saint-Germain’s late, late comeback against Atalanta. An interesting point raised by Gareth Southgate is that as teams were fighting the momentum of a game in an empty stadium seemed all the harder. “When games were going away from teams, the mentality was a bit different with no supporters in the stadium,” he said.