

# UEFA



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EDITORIAL



Although a semblance of normality has returned to football over the past 12 months, the COVID-19 pandemic has persisted and its prolonged impact on the game has thrust the subject of fitness to the fore. Ensuring players’ optimal condition was just one of the many challenges club and national team coaches faced over the course of another extraordinary year which, again, pushed new boundaries and necessitated even greater adaptability. Yet thanks to the solid foundations UEFA’s coaching courses provide – and which will be discussed in more detail in this edition – the challenges were not only met with preparedness and passion; they were duly overcome with remarkable results at all levels of the game.

Preparing early can help and a growing number of players are laying the foundations for their own coaching career even before hanging up their boots, initiating the transition from merely following the coach’s instructions to understanding and elaborating technical and tactical ideas. We focused on novel approaches employed by Italy and Belgium to facilitate this transition, which is not as simple as it may seem.

On the subject of EURO 2020, Italy’s path to glory last summer featured prominently in a comprehensive analysis of the most prolific EURO on record, with excellence identified at both ends

of the field. UEFA’s team of technical observers were tasked with deciphering an apparent paradox which saw a goalkeeper crowned as player of the tournament, despite a record number of goals being scored. An unprecedented amount of data was carefully collated with expert observations to piece together the puzzle and produce the most in-depth technical report into a European Championship ever.

The same amount of attention and painstaking detail was given to formulating the technical reports of the UEFA Champions League and UEFA Europa League, which fed back on the extraordinarily truncated 2019/20 editions. Once again, a glut of goals fuelled the technical observers’ discussions, and no stone was left unturned in identifying and explaining the game’s latest trends.

Meanwhile, the launch of the new UEFA fitness competence framework as a complement to the UEFA Coaching Convention was one of the most significant steps forward during a year in which the subject had gained greater attention. The increased presence, scope and influence of fitness coaches in these continued challenging times is likely to be one of the more positive legacies from this pandemic.

**Frank K. Ludolph**  
Head of Technical Development







With 15 goals, Bayern's Robert Lewandowski – in action here in the final against PSG – was the 2019/20 competition's top scorer.



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# 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...

**G**oals, 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, then 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 ploy was another topic analysed in the reports.

**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 dwell 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 Rutensteiner, 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 players swarm Paul Pogba in the semi-final against Manchester United.

Getty Images

**PRESSING**  
**The pressing question**  
A successful pressing game entails striking the right balance between risk and reward – something that Bayern and Sevilla achieved to spectacular effect.

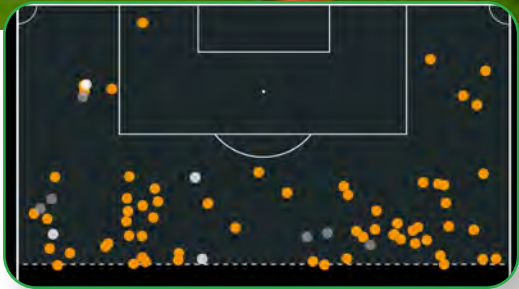
The 2020 UEFA Champions League technical report details how high pressing carries a degree of risk, but that it can also bring with it ample reward. With UEFA Europa League winners Sevilla also striking it rich with a competition-leading high press, it is fair to claim that the winning formula was made by striking the right balance; blending boldness with bravura.

The dynamic attacking play which contributed to the record average number of goals per game in the UEFA Champions League in 2019/20 was one of the standout trends observed in the competition. Clubs are not merely looking to appeal to their global audience by employing a more entertaining brand of football, however. They are doing so

to be successful. Bayern were a prime example of how a high press can, when used effectively, be lethal. Forty-four times Hansi Flick’s men got a shot in on goal within 15 seconds of a turnover, yet they rarely looked in any danger defensively, with an outstanding team organisation and collective trust catching the eye of Gareth Southgate. “You can see the angles of approach, the coordination of the pressing,” he said, echoing the words of his fellow UEFA observer Roberto Martínez, who was even more explicit in apportioning much of the merit for this disciplined approach to Flick.

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 7.9. However, as can be seen, their 31 high turnovers only led to four shots on goal, none of which found the target. Meanwhile, 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 and preference to press in all areas of the



**Sevilla pressing**  
● High turnovers 73  
● Ending in a shot 10  
● Ending in a goal 4

“If you don’t get it absolutely spot on, then they’ll play through you and you’re in trouble.”

**Gareth Southgate**  
UEFA technical observer

field, as part of their coach Jürgen Klopp’s pursuit of Gegenpressing perfection.

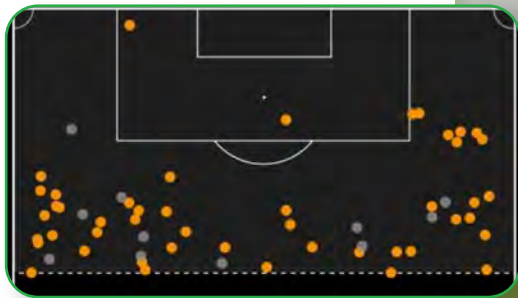
Interestingly, Ajax exhibited an even more impressive PPDA following their shift across to the UEFA Europa League in the round of 32, allowing opponents Getafe CF an average of just 6.78 passes before attempting a tackle. This was more than one pass fewer than the next hungriest side to win back the ball, Eintracht Frankfurt, and almost two fewer than champions Sevilla. Once again, the difference lay in the effectiveness, with Ajax scoring just twice and falling 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 quarter-final rout, Flick’s men continued to sustain a significant level of pressure, so much so it was their No9 – the 2019/20 competition’s top scorer, Robert Lewandowski – who stole the ball back

from his Barça counterpart Lionel Messi on the way to Philippe Coutinho slotting in Bayern’s seventh. “When the ball is lost, all the players press aggressively to win it back,” noted Cosmin Contra. That is hardly surprising, considering the demands Flick laid out upon being appointed as Bayern coach in November. “Unity is immensely important,” he said. “You 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. The fact they covered more ground in their 3-1 defeat in Munich (115.1km) than in any other game they played in Europe last season showed how much José 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. Stifling Barça, who 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. →



**Frankfurt pressing**  
● High turnovers 58  
● Ending in a shot 11  
● Ending in a goal 0



Frankfurt's pressing tactics illustrated by Timothy Chandler and Djibril Sow against Arsenal's Bukayo Saka in Europa League.

Getty Images



**SET PLAYS**  
**Set-piece menace subsides**  
The number of set-piece goals in the UEFA Champions League fell in 2019/20 though clubs including Bayern and Atlético still carried a threat.

No side in the 2019/20 UEFA Champions League scored more set-play goals than Bayern. Similarly, no team in the UEFA Europa League surpassed Sevilla's total of six – two of them in the final following Éver Banega free-kicks into the box. Yet it would be over-simplistic to say the two competition winners were the best-performing dead-ball sides in a campaign which offered some intriguing – and sometimes contrasting evidence – regarding the significance of set pieces.

In the UEFA Champions League, penalties aside, the combined number of goals from all other dead-ball opportunities fell from 65 to 48 – just 12.4% of the overall tally (compared with 17.8% a year earlier). This included a drop from 42 to 27 in the number of goals from corners. By contrast, in the UEFA Europa League, there were 63 goals scored following corners (or 11.5% of the total) while the overall portion of set-piece goals was 19.7%

The fact that in the senior competition corners were the source of just 7% of goals begged the question where set-play work now ranks on the list of coaches' priorities – not least after a season which, remarkably, featured just once the sight of a direct free-kick flying into the net in a UEFA Champions League match. Roberto Martínez wondered whether the wish to focus on aspects of open play, notably working the ball out from the back, might be a factor in less training-ground time being spent on set pieces.

That said, for some clubs, the work done certainly paid off. The UEFA Champions League's most productive teams were Bayern with five set-piece goals followed by Atlético with four. Both claimed three from corners, as did Chelsea FC, and the data suggests it was Diego Simeone's Atleti who were the most consistently dangerous. Of all the clubs to reach the knockout stage, the Madrid side had the highest percentage of goals from set pieces (30.8%) as well as the highest ratio of corners per shot (1.8:1).

While UEFA's analysis shows that

inswinging deliveries led to over half of the 27 UEFA Champions League goals from corners, in the case of Atlético, the majority of their deliveries were directed towards the penalty spot, including the one that led to Saúl Ñíguez's scrambled winner at home against Liverpool in the last 16. The same went for Crvena zvezda, who matched Atleti's rate of a goal attempt for every 1.8 corners and departed the competition following the group stage having scored from every nine corners taken.

Conversely, Borussia Dortmund, the club from the last 16 with the lowest corner-to-shot ratio (6:1), looked more commonly to the near post, aiming for a flick-on. So too Ajax, who across the competition ended with the second-lowest ratio (5.8:1), having seen too many deliveries fail to beat the first defender.

In the UEFA Europa League, Sevilla, along with FC Astana, recorded the same ratio of 1.8 corners per shot as Atlético. As it was, Julen Lopetegui's men scored from

only one of their 39 corners, yet managed 43 shots. One possible factor was their ploy of stationing three players on the edge of the opposition box, leaving them well placed to stop counterattacks and also to profit from any short clearances by getting in a shot from distance.

The actual threat of conceding from a long-range shot was in Maurizio Sarri's calculations, meanwhile, in packing Juventus's box with defenders but leaving the edge of the area free: it meant the Serie A side allowed a shot from every 1.7 corners (the UEFA Champions League's worst ratio) but the gamble of allowing low-quality chances from distance seems to have paid off with the fact Juve conceded only once from 40 corners faced.

On the defensive side, Bayern ended the season with the best ratio of corners to shots conceded, allowing an opposition attempt from every 5.4 corners faced (in total, seven shots from 38 corners). They had a scare when, from a Barcelona short

corner, a Lionel Messi ball beat everyone before striking the far post with the score at 1-1 in their quarter-final, yet ended the campaign unbreached from corners.

While Bayern used a zonal set-up, compatriots RB Leipzig – who avoided conceding from any of their 51 corners faced – chose a mixed zonal and man-marking strategy. In the UEFA Europa League, meanwhile, technical observer Dušan Fitzel suggested the introduction of VAR in the knockout stage prompted a move towards more zonal marking, yet another German side, Bayer 04 Leverkusen, bucked that trend by mainly man-marking with a single player defending zonally in the six yard box – and their reward was a competition-best ratio of one shot conceded for every ten corners faced. At the opposite end of the scale, Beşiktaş JK conceded a goal from every six corners, after allowing 18 opposition attempts from the 23 they had to defend.

Finally, FC Copenhagen were the least efficient attacking team from corners,

with one shot per 8.2 taken. Indeed from 41 corners (61% of them inswinging), they managed only five shots. That said, they at least scored once, which is more than semi-finalists Manchester United FC managed, despite their 22 shots from 66 corners.

**GOALKEEPING**  
**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 aloft in August.

The prize was not his personally, but being the first to raise it into the Lisbon sky was of causal significance. With six clean sheets, Neuer was unbeatable in more than half the matches 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 assured footwork meant he did even more of his talking with the ball at his feet, and his words were duly delivered poetically.

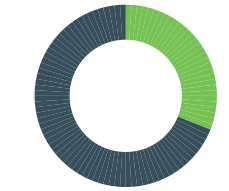
"Not every keeper is like Neuer, who's fabulous with his feet," commented technical observer Ginés Meléndez. That comes in particularly handy when goalkeepers are now allowed to pass the ball short to a teammate inside their own penalty area – or, as FC Internazionale Milano often did, receive the ball 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 dabble 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 pulling opponents 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 Meléndez.

The expanded range of a goalkeeper's options from goal kicks added a new dimension to their game, with those →



**Atlético corners**  
▲ Successful inswingers  
▲ Unsuccessful inswingers  
▼ Successful outswingers  
▼ Unsuccessful outswingers



**30.8%**  
Percentage of Atlético de Madrid goals from set plays, the highest among the last 16 clubs



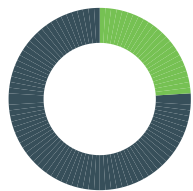
Felipe scores Atlético's second goal against Lokomotiv Moskva in the Champions League group stage.



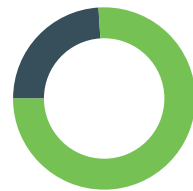


Getty Images

Kylian Mbappé shoots against Manuel Neuer in the Champions League final.



**24%**  
Portion of goal kicks taken short to a player in the box



**76%**  
the save percentage of Manuel Neuer

more capable with their feet, such as Neuer – who completed 98% of his passes from goal kicks – able 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: the Bayern No1 had the lowest average pass distance from goal kicks. Compare this with Paris custodian Keylor Navas, who alternated 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 finalists.

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 No9s 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 a 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 six times.

Handanovič 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 in defensive build-up 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, Handanovič 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 paving the way for them to be scored at the other end.

**GOALSCORING**  
**How the goals were scored**  
Crosses 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, 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 Rodrygo’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 (33) 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. Given 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 observers’ 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: Jürgen Klopp’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 counterattacking game which reaped 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 Martinez, 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 [Maxwel] 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 Óliver Torres’s spectacular overhead kick against Qarabağ 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 FC 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 (24.61%).

Scoring the first goal was another talking point in the technical reports, given the percentage of games in which the team breaking the deadlock managed to avoid defeat – 86.1% 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 here was that stopping 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. 🌱



Getty Images

Kingsley Coman heads in the goal that gave Bayern their sixth elite European title.



# SMOOTHING THE PATHWAY

Belgium and Italy adopt a novel approach to the transition from playing to coaching.

**T**ake a look at your favourite league table and work out how many of the coaches were top-level players. And how many have become successful coaches without an illustrious playing career. One of football's great debating points is whether one background is better than the other. Do great footballers make great coaches? Or, as Arrigo Sacchi famously argued, "You don't have to have been a horse to be a jockey." Italy's coaching guru could be cited alongside the likes of José Mourinho, André Villas-Boas or Maurizio Sarri as examples of a coaching vocation weighing more heavily than playing experience as a top-level pro.

At the other end of the spectrum, a list of big names who stepped rapidly from the pitch to the technical area could start with Pep Guardiola, Zinedine Zidane, Diego Simeone, Gareth Southgate, Didier Deschamps... and in the middle, a group whose playing careers were prematurely truncated by injury, such as Thomas Tuchel at 25 or Rafa Benítez at 27, opening doors for an early kick-off in the coaching profession.

The UEFA Coaching Convention offers scope for national associations to streamline the transition from playing to coaching by organising – to summarise some of the wording in Articles 25–27 of the convention – "a specific course for long-serving professionals that comprises the content of both a UEFA B diploma course and a UEFA A diploma course". The 'terms and conditions' of the combined courses stipulate 240 hours of education based on the full A diploma course plus modules from the B course, with a 50-50 split between off-pitch learning and reality-based practical units on the pitch. And, to qualify for the course, participants must have played at least seven full seasons in the top division of a league in a UEFA or FIFA member association. Some countries were quick on the ball, with Italy, for example, currently conducting a fourth combined A + B course for former top pros. And Belgium has taken a different angle by offering

a B diploma course for players currently active in the national squad during the spells when they are together on international duty.

## Where and when to start

Early transitions from playing to coaching are rare but not new – as illustrated by some of the speakers at UEFA's student exchange events for coaches engaged in UEFA Pro diploma courses. Gareth Southgate, for example, expresses reservations about stepping too quickly from pitch to technical area. As he explains in his book *Anything Is Possible*: "I was offered the chance to take over as manager. It meant finishing my last season as captain and then beginning the next in charge of everything from team selection, strategy and formation to player transfers and staff responsibilities. I accepted the job based on my experience wearing the captain's armband. I was used to speaking to the team and knew how I wanted to be treated as a player. Looking back, that was nowhere near enough in terms of preparation for being a club manager. I had no idea how complex it was going to be. It all happened so quickly that I didn't take my coaching qualifications until after the season had started."

Thomas Schaaf also recalls the early grounding he obtained by coaching a Werder Bremen youth squad while still playing in the first team. "It was quite intense, but I believe it was a really good education, a good decision on how to approach things. As a player, you naturally think that you might know it all, or at least a lot. But you see quickly that you're missing key background knowledge. I really enjoyed being so immersed in it while I was still active as a player."

Debate on the timing of coach education is by no means exclusive to the men's game. Sweden's Anna Signeul, currently the Finland women's national team coach, regards herself as fortunate to have had the chance to start her coach education via courses during the close season. "I had the equivalent of a UEFA B licence at 24," she recalls, "and, by →



the time I stopped playing, I already had my A diploma. This was a huge benefit, as it meant I could go directly into coaching and, while I was doing my coaching qualifications, I learned so many things that helped me as a football player.” She then helped to create a similar pathway for top players during her 12 years in charge of Scotland. Former England manager Hope Powell comments: “I started coaching at 17 while I was playing and I believe it really helped to develop my game. I got my C and B licences as a player so I was actively coaching while playing and found the transition just part of the process and not at all challenging.” She became the first woman to earn a UEFA Pro diploma and took over the England team at the age of 32.

Italy’s example

Although they all speak positively about the advantages of starting coach education while still active, one of the realities of today’s game is that the workloads borne by top professionals make it difficult to blend playing with coach education. Italy was one of the front-runners in realising that a combined UEFA A + B course could accelerate transitions and shorten intervals

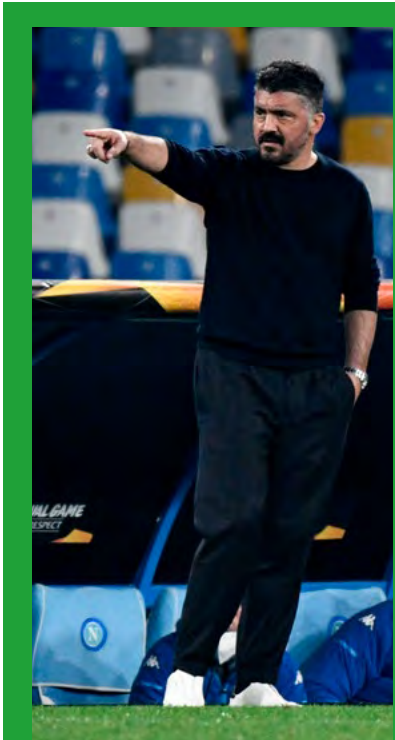


“I had no idea how complex the transition from player to manager was going to be. It all happened so quickly that I didn’t take my coaching qualifications until after the season had started.”

Gareth Southgate  
England head coach



Former England women’s national team manager Hope Powell started coaching when she was 17 and got her C and B diplomas while she was still playing.



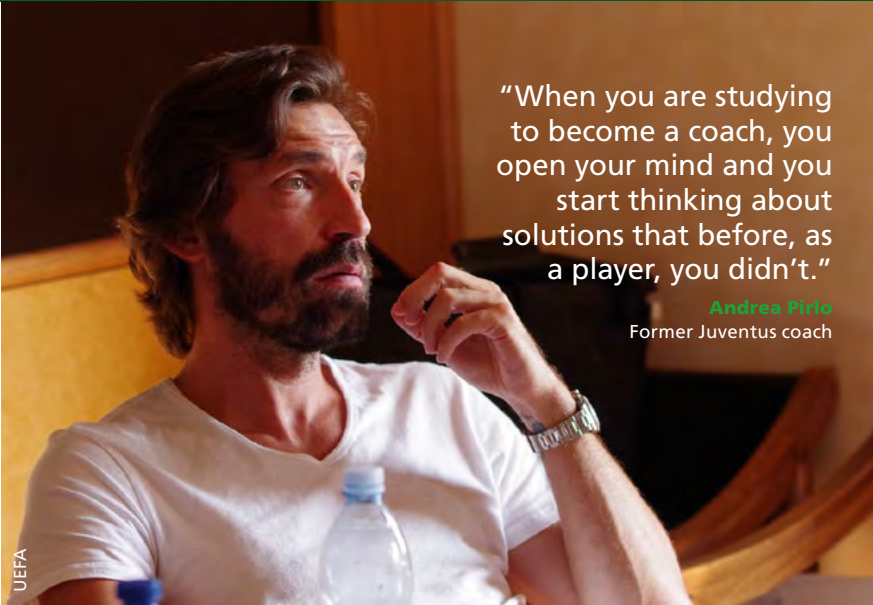
Gennaro Gattuso



between hanging up boots and taking up residence in the technical area. Back in 2012, the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) organised a course attended by ten of the players who had become world champions in 2006, including Fabio Cannavaro, Gennaro Gattuso, Filippo Inzaghi, Marco Materazzi, Alessandro Nesta and Gianluca Zambrotta, plus, curiously, former goalkeeper Giovanni Galli – in the squad when Italy had previously lifted the trophy in Madrid in 1982. Luca Toni and Morgan De Sanctis were among the familiar names at the second course in 2017; Thiago Motta and Andrea Pirlo at the third in 2018; and the group currently negotiating the fourth course includes Alessandro Del Piero, Daniele De Rossi, Riccardo Montolivo and Christian Vieri.

“Examining topics in depth and speaking with other students are the most beautiful things about the course,” says their colleague Federico Balzaretti, the international full-back who took a silver medal home from EURO 2012. “And subjects like psychology and data analysis in which I have fewer skills but are very important for a coach. I also love terminology very much: as a coach you must communicate clearly with your players.” Andrea Pirlo, in an interview for the FIGC’s coach education magazine, commented: “When you are studying to become a coach, you open your mind and you start thinking about solutions that before, as a player, you didn’t.”

Renzo Ulivieri, Italy’s director of coach education, acknowledges that the courses require a different approach. “In the combined UEFA B and A course, we can avoid some of the technical aspects that we have in other courses. After all, we are dealing with great ex-professional football



“When you are studying to become a coach, you open your mind and you start thinking about solutions that before, as a player, you didn’t.”

Andrea Pirlo  
Former Juventus coach

players, so they are perfectly familiar with the details of technique. What we have to teach them instead is how to correct other players, exploiting the advantage of their own technical level. They wouldn’t be great football players if they didn’t possess excellent football technique, but teaching is completely different. We have to teach them how to teach.”

He also draws on the players’ own experiences. “Our students offer us perspectives on a concept that is deeply rooted in our football school, though it might be questioned in other national schools: analytical methods. For example, in one of our recent sessions I asked Christian Vieri about his relationship with the ball when he was a very young player in Pisa. He answered that it was a complicated relationship, but before and after every training session he did what he felt he needed: analytical technique with a view to become better. The same with Alessandro Del Piero. He explained how at every training session he dedicated time to practising free-kicks with the same objective – to become better in this speciality. This is our school philosophy. They have learned from their experiences in the game but now they have to give the right tools to others.”

The Belgian way

Belgium’s coach education director, Kris Van Der Haegen, says much the same as his Italian counterpart. He is currently directing the novel – not to say revolutionary – scheme which the Royal Belgian Football Association (RBFA) has

set up to allow current national team players to go through the UEFA diploma course. “This is a new experience for me as an educator,” he comments. “It has confirmed my belief that coach education must be learner-centred. They are a different group, so you need a different approach. You have to adapt. You obviously set out to deliver the same content as you would to other students but you don’t need to teach them the game of football. Also, they want to study the same way as they play – at high speed and with great intensity. Their tactical level is amazing and sometimes you realise that you’ve covered a topic in 45 minutes which, with another group, could easily have taken two hours. Their standards are high; they ask a lot of questions; and, of course, they expect the course leaders to be well prepared. So as an educator you need to make sure you are giving them challenging exercises. If you asked them to do a three-hour session on a single topic, they would disconnect. Roberto is very clear about this. In fact the way he deals with and understands the players is amazing.” Roberto is, of course, Roberto Martínez, Belgium’s men’s national team coach and technical director.

The Belgian course is unique in that it allows the participants to meet UEFA Coaching Convention requirements by exploiting the periods of time when the Red Devils get together for international double-headers. A parallel project has been designed for members of the women’s squad (a mix of current and former players) which is also a

groundbreaking innovation. The use of precious time during get-togethers evidently requires full support from the national team coach – and Roberto Martínez has been unstinting. “Belgian football has produced a golden generation,” he says, “and it’s a unique moment when you become the world’s number one. So our aim is to prepare these players to extend their influence on Belgian football beyond their playing days. We don’t want to lose them the moment they retire. We want to offer them the opportunity to make the transition from playing to coaching as smoothly as possible. So, within the RBFA we designed a plan to create a new pathway. Kris is the course director and we have a group of tutors to work in specific areas. The COVID situation has meant that we’ve needed to be very careful about bringing tutors in from outside, so the coaching staff around the national team have had roles to play during the course.”

Logistics are based on assigning one day of each get-together to course activities – and provisions are evidently made for players who are injured or not selected. “There are regular contacts with all the participants,” Martínez explains →

2006 world champions Fabio Cannavaro and Alessandro Del Piero took the first coach education course organised by the Italian Football Federation for former players in 2012.





and we have parallel arrangements in place for anyone who is injured or not in the squad.” Apart from online work, participants are given alternative dates to attend sessions at the national training centre in Tubize.

Martínez admits to being surprised by the response from the players. “I started asking players in 2018 if they would be interested in this sort of course. I didn’t try to persuade them or pressurise them – just asked if they would like to participate. I thought that maybe ten or so might be interested, so it was a surprise to get 23. And we had feedback from a lot of ex-internationals who wished they had been given an opportunity like this.”

“I think one of the key elements in coach education,” Kris Van Der Haegen maintains, “is to deliver the course content in an optimal learning environment and then transfer it into a real work environment at a club. The better we align the learning and work environments, the more effective our courses will be. That’s how to help them develop the knowledge, the skills and the attitudes they will need to take into the job.” He and Martínez feel that working with the players while they are still active seems to help these elements to interlock. “It’s a well-designed and well-organised concept,” Martínez remarks. “It’s a great group. Players like Romelu Lukaku, Jan Vertonghen, Kevin De Bruyne... they are the same generation but, within that, there’s quite a wide range of ages and levels of experience. And then they are playing at the best clubs in England, Spain, Germany, Portugal, Italy... so they come to the course from different footballing cultures and from different dressing rooms. Doing the coaching course means that they don’t just talk to each other as players and that adds a dimension to the group.”

**Focusing on specifics**

“It is something of a perfect storm,” Martínez maintains, “because, apart from looking at topics like in-possession and out-of-possession concepts or overall playing philosophies, we can pinpoint aspects that are specific to individual players and, as they are at an important point in their playing careers, this input is something they can take back to their clubs. The other very important thing is that the participants begin to think as coaches. As a player you tend to focus on details in your own game, but when



Kevin De Bruyne is one of Belgium’s current national team players following a UEFA B coaching diploma course while on international duty.

Belgian FA

you begin to look through the eyes of a coach you are encouraged to broaden your horizons and think more about the other components in the game. Apart from the technical and tactical aspects that they study, they become familiar with organisational issues and a structured approach through tactical periodisation and so on. More importantly, thinking as a coach enhances their authority, leadership qualities and decision-making. All this, as I said, goes with them back to their clubs. So I’m sure this is better than waiting till retirement age to start your coaching qualification process.”

A further benefit is that course content can be designed to interlock with day-to-day aspects of international duty. “This is what we do with the women’s group,” Van Der Haegen explains. “Our double-header in February started with a game against the Netherlands on a Thursday. So, after dinner on the Sunday, we gave the course participants some clips of the Dutch team and asked them to devise a game plan along with three training sessions aimed at preparing it. At individual meetings on the next morning, they presented what they had done. In the afternoon we – the coaching staff –

“The players want to study the same way as they play – at high speed and with great intensity. Their tactical level is amazing and sometimes you realise that you’ve covered a topic in 45 minutes which, with another group, could easily have taken two hours.”

**Kris Van Der Haegen**  
Belgium’s coach education director



Belgian FA

presented our tactical plan for the game. So they felt involved in the preparation work. And it got them thinking, looking for solutions. This is important, as there is less exposure of women’s football on TV and it’s easy for them to be experienced and enthusiastic players, but they are much less experienced as observers. The best thing, though, is that you can see on the pitch that the coaching course is developing their understanding of the game and giving added value to their attacking and defensive play.

“With the men, the approach is different,” he adds. “We give them clips



Zinedine Zidane

from the major leagues and avoid using the teams they play for. By the way, the lockdown had a silver lining, as the players had more time on their hands while there was no club activity. We set up a studio at Tubize and organised Zoom meetings conducted by Roberto and myself. Then we put them to work in pairs or trios. This is good because the pairings can be productive. Imagine, for example, that you have Simon Mignolet and Dries Mertens working together. The goalkeeper will focus on being organised and structured; the striker will lean towards creativity and ways of upsetting defences. He will like surprises while the keeper doesn’t like them at all! It’s a good mix.”

Time will tell whether the Belgian project will inspire other national associations to follow suit. Is it enough to allow top players to embark on coaching qualifications once they retire? Or is it also viable to encourage them into coaching while they are literally and figuratively on the ball? Evidently a few more rungs need to be climbed on the ladder towards a top-level coaching career. Anyone who wishes to go on towards a UEFA Pro diploma course in the future will be required to complete at least one season as head coach at elite youth or



senior amateur level, or as assistant coach in the professional game, so that all the knowledge and experience acquired in their courses can be tested and improved in a real coaching environment before moving up to the top rungs.

Martínez believes that encouraging active players to take an interest in coaching will yield dividends for Belgian football. “It’s great that the players begin to think like coaches and I’m convinced that in six years, maybe, or certainly within the next decade, we will see quite a few of them in action as coaches – which can only be good for the future of Belgian football.”

Kevin De Bruyne agrees with his boss about the benefits. “The project has provided me with a great opportunity to look beyond my playing days, while also benefitting the way I look at that game right now as an active footballer,” says Manchester City’s attacking midfielder. “I think it’s important for every player to consider what comes next, no matter what stage of their career they are at, and the course has been an enjoyable way of doing that. To be able to fit it in around trips with the national team is a huge benefit and is hopefully making us as a squad think more about the game. And that can only serve to help us out on the grass.” 🌱





# MIND GAMES

How important are mental aspects in coach education?

If an audience were asked to list aspects of coaching, most would immediately focus on technical, tactical and physical elements of the game. But how important are mental aspects in football and in coaching?

The question emerged from a recent experience-sharing event organised by UEFA. The football Union of Russia had requested UEFA support for a further education programme aimed at elite coaches from premier league clubs, academies and national teams. The pandemic converted the programme into a series of online events, among them a three-day session organised by UEFA's technical development department and presented by the French Football Federation (FFF). National technical director Hubert Fournier kicked off

the proceedings. Lionel Rouxel, general manager of France's national teams in the U16–U20 bracket, led a session on match play and performance. And it was Franck Thivilier's presentation on the optimisation of mental performance that raised the

question. UEFA takes a holistic approach to the development of players and coaches, on the basis that both are human beings. So, to what extent should mental aspects feature in the UEFA diploma courses organised by member associations? →



In his UEFA Pro courses at the French Football Federation, Franck Thivilier highlights the importance of stress management and mental performance for coaches and players.





Coaches are under permanent media surveillance, as Didier Deschamps was at the press conference after the EURO 2016 final.

Permanent surveillance

Thivilier, coach education specialist and member of UEFA’s Jira Panel [the panel brings together recognised experts in the art of coaching and educating coaches], has special responsibility at the FFF for psychological aspects of the game in addition to his tasks as head of coach education. “The coach is the most observed person at a club,” he says, “and he is under permanent surveillance – by players, directors, supporters, media, local politicians... If the coach shows the slightest sign of weakness or succumbs to pressure, he becomes fragile and vulnerable. In coach education, one needs to emphasise that the external pressures are extremely strong and that there is a need to generate, within yourself, a counter pressure that the coach needs to discover and develop. It is also important to point out that the coach’s emotions are highly contagious. One who is stressed communicates that stress to the players and can easily contaminate the whole group. So stress management is a crucial issue.”

“It is one thing to become competent in the technical and tactical aspects of the job,” he adds. “But the aspect of mental performance is like a new continent waiting to be explored in greater depth. Leading and guiding a group of men or

women requires a great deal of mental preparation, mental energy and, above all, self-knowledge.”

As a result, the FFF has injected ‘mental performance’ topics into all coach education courses: 10 hours at

the UEFA B and C levels, 21 hours for UEFA A students, and 32 hours for coaches bidding for UEFA Pro diplomas. In each case, work is split between lecture room and pitch, with the Pro students also benefiting from individual support.

The FFF is not alone in highlighting the relevance of mental performance and well-being. Nigel Best, Northern Ireland’s coach education manager, provides one example. “It had become apparent to me through my contacts with elite professional players and coaches on our UEFA courses that there was a need to consider mental needs. And some specific incidents had raised my awareness of the need for mental health and stress management issues to be included on our curriculum,” he explains.

The role of psychology

The next step was triggered by a fortuitous encounter with a psychiatrist called Jagdish Basra – though in coach education circles her name is invariably shortened to ‘Dr Jag’. “We agreed,” Best recalls, “that she would give a one-hour presentation to

a group of former pros on the B licence course. We knew that top pros are often sceptical about engaging with psychiatrists and that men, in particular, are reluctant to open up on emotional problems. But it turned out to be a cathartic experience for them and, at the end, 17 of the 20 remained behind to consult with Dr Jag individually. This fully justified the risk we had taken by including the topic in our timetable. These days we have a mental health curriculum from UEFA B through to the Pro level, with Dr Jag helping us to design content specific to what we believe is appropriate at each stage of the coaches’ journey through their UEFA pathway. We have discussed expansion beyond the mental health aspect and have now added to the curriculum the mental/ psychological aspect of the game covering areas like mindset, managing emotions, leadership and so on.”

Niall O’Regan, his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, has led the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) along a similarly comprehensive pathway with Dr Jag among the names on the team sheet, along with a number of specialised guest speakers and Jennifer Lace, a sport psychology practitioner in coach education. Space does not permit an in-depth perusal of the FAI’s newly launched UEFA licence psychology

“In coach education, one needs to emphasise that the external pressures are extremely strong and that there is a need to generate, within yourself, a counter pressure that the coach needs to discover and develop.”

Franck Thivilier, coach education specialist and member of UEFA’s Jira Panel

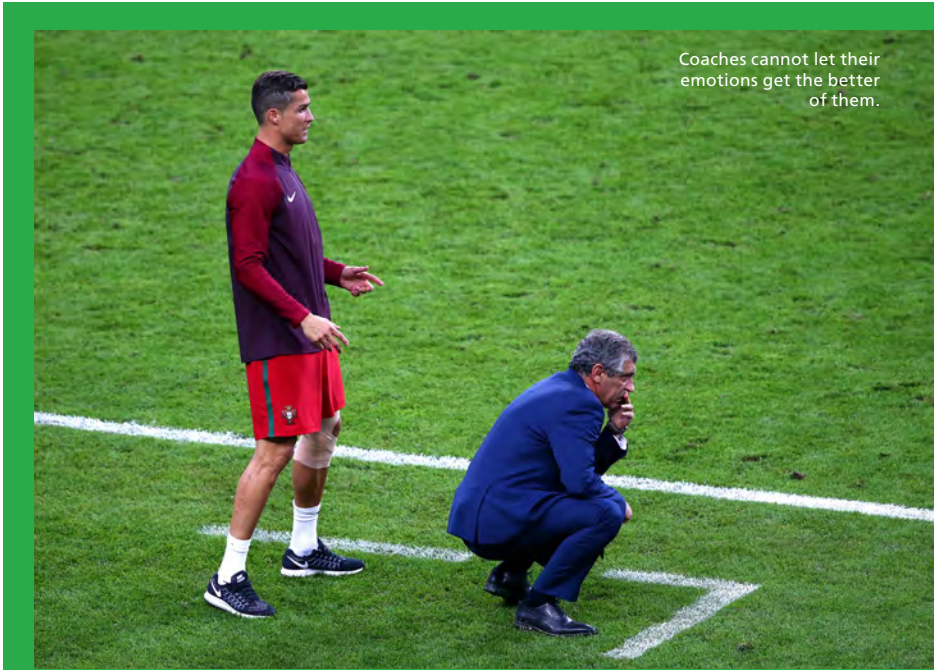
curriculum but there is room for a bit of sampling – their blueprint for the mental performance modules in UEFA Elite Youth A courses for example.

The course content features topics such as Understanding Teenage Brains (the scientific data and their relevance to football); how principles of mindfulness and relaxation techniques can be applied to football; methods of enhancing motivation and commitment; effective leadership; and conflict resolution. And one of the interesting exercises is based on identifying the leadership skills in great coaches and what made them effective. The curriculum for UEFA B courses similarly includes a group discussion session based on looking at talented players and identifying the behavioural patterns and

the personality traits which influenced their footballing performances.

Mental health at every level

All three associations, however, are keen to stress that the importance of mental performance is not exclusive to elite levels – and they have done this by including modules on each rung of the UEFA coach education ladder. At UEFA C level, aimed principally at coaches in grassroots football, the FFF course focuses on identifying and implementing mechanisms for controlling emotions and for listening to and understanding oneself and others, using a reference book about football providing a pathway to self-knowledge as a platform for discussion. The FAI C course includes a



Coaches at all levels of the game need to be able to comfort and encourage their players.



“We have discussed expansion beyond the mental health aspect and have now added the mental/ psychological aspect of the game; areas like mindset, managing emotions, leadership.”

Nigel Best, Northern Ireland’s coach education manager





module where students are encouraged to understand how psychology can best be applied to football, along with mechanisms for creating a positive team culture.

“In the grassroots game,” Niall O’Regan comments, “we have a collaboration with Jigsaw, which is the national centre for youth mental health here in Ireland. They focus on intervening early to support the mental health of those aged 12 to 25 and they recognise that coaches are in an ideal position to promote and support young people’s mental health. We conducted a workshop which is now being delivered regionally through the FAI’s online learning management system as a self-paced e-learning course where coaches can participate whenever it is convenient for them.”

Up at UEFA Pro level, students need to be equipped to step into a world where behaviour and body language on the touchline can be subjected to constant scrutiny from TV cameras. Unsurprisingly, this is where the French and Irish modules converge in promoting self-reflection, analysis of emotional intelligence and the use of the various personality tests currently available. The FFF’s UEFA Pro course, having worked hard on concentration and motivation issues at A level, focuses on issues such as identifying and improving vitality in order to increase the inner energy levels of an individual or a group – leading into factors such as enhancing the quality of sleep; using regeneration activities such as yoga, meditation, breathing techniques, balneology and even, as one leading English club does, aromatherapy; or work on relationships. The eight four-hour modules also address self-awareness issues, such as understanding the mechanisms that govern the coach’s own identity with a view to building a group identity – and then comparing group performances with the management methods underlying them.

As Nigel Best remarks: “At the elite end of football, preparation for success goes beyond physical, technical and tactical preparation. Preparation of the mind is also critical, both for individuals and the team. It is critical for players and coaches

The confidence that coaches can inspire in their players is vitally important, as Pep Guardiola showed with Phil Foden at Manchester City.

Nowadays, social media is part and parcel of a footballer’s life and it is up to coaches to harness its influence.

in order to make correct decisions, and it is the ability to make the correct decision regularly, even under pressure, that distinguishes those who regularly achieve success.”

Emotional intelligence

For Franck Thivilier, the greatest advantage derived from mental performance education is to help the coach to empathise with players and, above all, to create an optimal working environment. “The first thing is to develop and control the environment,” he says, “because it can have an enormous impact on attitude and performance – especially in this age when players so often move from one country to another and encounter a completely different environment. A lot of research demonstrates that environment exercises an influence on behaviour. To give you a simple example, if you go for a walk in the forest, your heart rate is lower than if you were doing the same walk in the streets of Paris. So the coach can gain benefits from analysing the work context and recognising the elements in the environment that favour or inhibit mental activation.”

His compatriot Gérard Houllier always maintained that “leadership is the transfer of emotions” – and Thivilier endorses that standpoint. “What do you think is the most difficult psychological element for a player or coach to manage?” he asked his online audience in Russia. The one-word answer was ‘emotions’. On the same wavelength, the FAI’s UEFA A course content focuses on the management of emotions, while their Pro level syllabus highlights the importance of assessing one’s own emotional intelligence. Thivilier, meanwhile, extends the Houllier pathway by examining methodologies and the levers that can be used on the training ground to generate emotions. “Emotional states can have an impact on your behaviour and your level of competence,” he says. “So, for the coach, it’s important to be able to create emotional states that can motivate.”

“When you are looking at methodology,” he adds, “the basic question is ‘how do I learn?’. I learn by



experiencing emotions and I understand by analysing the tasks I am asked to perform. On the training ground, the coach basically tells a story. You could say that the story is a season and that every chapter in that story is a match. The coach needs to bear that in mind every day and make sure that the story is coherent, that the players understand, and that they find it coherent and, if possible, inspiring. A good story will stimulate the imagination, create positive attitudes within the group’s dynamics, and convert problems and setbacks into learning opportunities.”

Interestingly, Thivilier encourages coaches, when watching videos, not only to take note of tactical details but also to relive their own emotions with a view to understanding the mechanisms that govern one’s own identity and then building a group with a strong identity of its own. Part of emotional intelligence is to intelligently use the emotional information transmitted by other individuals within the group.

The personal touch

The enormous – and healthy – diversity of individual and collective identities gives coaches latitude within the framework of mental performance. Niall O’Regan says: “Coaches are now really beginning to understand how significant a role psychology plays in their environment and they are working through the

comprehension and understanding stage of the material presented on our courses. Many of the coaches wanted and requested further information or an implementation list of what to do and how to do it. But we explain to them that they, as coaches, need to take the information, reflect upon it and look at ways in which they can implement it in their own environments. There is not a basic guide or a one-size fit. The coaches have been extremely engaged and find the thought-provoking messages delivered during the presentations and the in-depth discussions significant in terms of peer learning.”

“Mental performance,” Thivilier emphasises, “is not just about what happens on the training ground. It permeates all the work that the coach does. It’s about creating and maintaining a healthy, energised environment; generating positive interaction between all the cells within the organism; limiting the impact of external influences on the work to be done; and making sure there are facilities for well-defined tasks – not just pitches, gyms, fitness rooms or dressing rooms, but also spaces for leisure, meditation or other relaxing and de-stressing activities.” In coach education, how important is it to point out that the psychological well-being and mental performance of coaches can positively influence the performance of their players? 🌱



# REFINING THE ART OF SCORING AND SAVING

The UEFA EURO 2020 technical report covers all the key trends and developments observed during another tournament which broke records, beginning with the number of goals...



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The most prolific UEFA EURO on record was the first where a goalkeeper was crowned player of the tournament. Unravelling this apparent paradox was the role of UEFA's team of technical observers, who witnessed sheer excellence at both ends of the field during a tournament which will be remembered as much for its outstanding attacking as it will for the new benchmarks set in goalkeeping, in particular by Italy's Gianluigi Donnarumma, who stood out from all the players who took to the field throughout 51 pulsating matches.

The scorers of the first goal of the tournament also supplied the last. It was a fitting way to close the circle on a triumph which Italy had called in their opening 3-0 victory over Turkey, and they were not bluffing. The Azzurri entered the tournament off the back of a 27-game unbeaten streak, including a ten-out-of-ten-win qualifying campaign. Even head coach Roberto Mancini would have been considered crazy for predicting, when he picked up the pieces following a failed 2018 World Cup qualifying campaign, that he could put them all back together again so perfectly within three years.

### Back lines

Italy were one of the very few teams at EURO 2016 to play with a three-man defence, with Andrea Barzagli, Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini forming the foundations upon which Antonio Conte built a side which were eliminated by Germany in the quarter-finals. With the now retired Barzagli this summer taking on a coaching role within the Italian Football Federation (FIGC), Bonucci and Chiellini remained to hold the defensive fort five years later, though the shift under Mancini to a four-man back line was not born out of necessity. With Leonardo

Spinazzola and Giovanni Di Lorenzo flanking Juventus' experienced duo, it did not matter that Mancini was effectively ensuring Italy would once again go countertrend with a four-man back line, with no fewer than 15 teams at EURO 2020 deploying a back three – or five – at some stage of the tournament. The effective use of full-backs in supporting the attacks was one of the features of the title-winning side, with Spinazzola also named in the team of the tournament. Packie Bonner, after watching Spinazzola in action against Austria, noted how he “always threatened to get to the byeline and we saw him twice in the six-yard box. He linked exceptionally well with Lorenzo Insigne, who took Austria's right-back infield to open space.”

This ability to combine with forwards and not necessarily always overlap was also discussed

as an enhancement to the increased attacking identity of a modern full-back. “This is coming more and more into the game,” Mixu Paatelainen remarked. “Full-backs like to come inside as, when they do, they take the opposing winger out of his comfort zone. I see this as a symptom that coaches are working on many ways of unsettling their opponents.” By forcing opponents out of their comfort zones, full-backs or wing-backs were getting into their own to score 16 goals at EURO 2020, including Luke Shaw's early opener in the final, which justified England manager Gareth Southgate's surprise decision to start out with a back five.

To conclude Bonner's quote on Spinazzola, he added that Marco Verratti “did a good job of covering any counters on that side.” This was part of a collective defensive strategy which permitted the full-backs to attack without fear of letting the team down by losing possession.

“I think Italy, when they lost the ball in the attacking part of the pitch, they broke the possibility [for their

opponents] to give passes out wide,” said Jean-François Domergue. “They closed the density of the players between 25-40 metres with six or seven players and left Bonucci and Chiellini behind with Jorginho in front. The others do the transitions, and I think Italy are working very well in blocking to keep the ball.”

### Out to (im)press

This Italian block often occurred in the opposition half, with their high press and counterpress a tactic which also found a prominent place on the technical observers' notepads. After observing Italy in the group stage, Esteban Cambiasso reported back on what he had stood out in the Azzurri's game. “If I have to choose one key factor, it's the pressure on opponents in the attacking third,” he said. “They press with a lot of players and there's a very short time between them losing the ball and winning it back. It means they don't give too many chances for the opposition to make quick transitions.” Five of Italy's regains in the attacking third led to goals.

Faced with this pressure, the deep construction trend observed since the 2019 rule change regarding goal kicks was somewhat tempered, with teams showing

a little more caution when trying to build out from the back. England goalkeeper Jordan Pickford, for instance, made 20 long clearances in the semi-final against Denmark and 26 in the final when, as Packie Bonner remarked, “it became difficult for the wing-backs to get into attack mode, while Kane was losing the

ball in the air instead of being able to drop deep to receive.”

### The centre forward: true or false

The England captain was not alone in meeting congestion in central areas, with the observers reflecting at length on the trials teams were having in breaking through where three centre-backs were being protected by one or two screening midfielders. This sparked a true or false discussion among the observers on the role of the No9. “Germany played with three attackers rather than a No9,” said Steffen Freund. “The No9 isn't dead – he just has to be more flexible, rotate and still appear in the right places to score goals.”

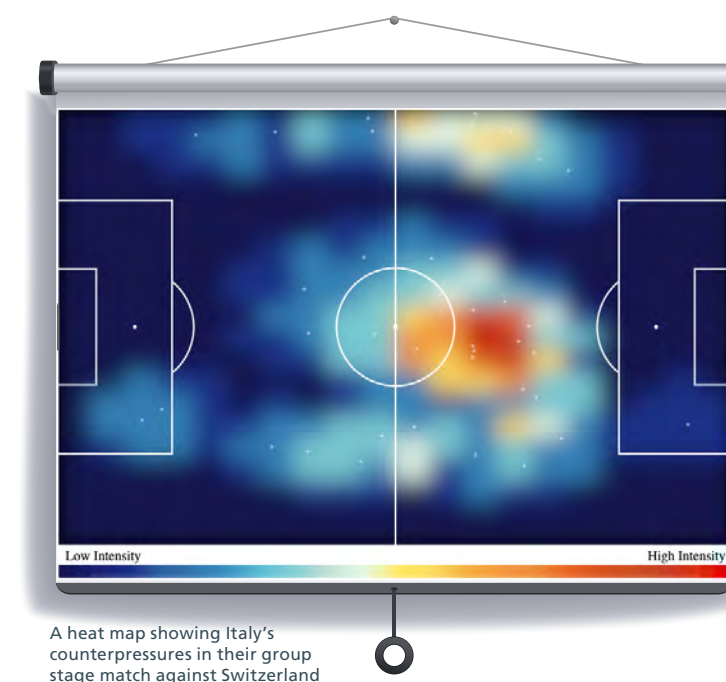
“[Robert] Lewandowski is a classic striker,” Dušan Fitzel added. “And Patrik Schick had an excellent tournament. But look what happened in the final when England started playing the long ball. →

“With Pickford's long clearances it became difficult for the wing-backs to get into attack mode, while Kane was losing the ball in the air instead of being able to drop deep to receive.”

**Packie Bonner**  
Technical observer



England goalkeeper Jordan Pickford made many long clearances to Harry Kane instead of building out from the back like other teams.



A heat map showing Italy's counterpressures in their group stage match against Switzerland

“Italy press with a lot of players and there's a very short time between them losing the ball and winning it back. It means they don't give too many chances for the opposition to make quick transitions.”

**Esteban Cambiasso**  
Technical observer





The fact that Italy conceded only three goals during EURO 2020 was down largely to goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma, who went on to be crowned player of the tournament.

Italy's two stoppers dominated Harry Kane. They won the ball every time. So what we saw was the type of central attacker who moved wide or went deep." This expansion of a forward's competences was noted also in Belgium's 2-1 win over Denmark. "When Belgium had [Romelu] Lukaku in the middle of the pitch in the first half, Simon Kjær handled him well and then the coach changed, moved [Kevin] de Bruyne into the centre and Lukaku destroyed Denmark out there – Bingo!" said Peter Rudbæk. Belgium coach Roberto Martínez had rightly seen that width was where most of the goals were stemming from, with crosses and cut-backs causing havoc in creating 35% of goals and contributing also to a record number of own goals being scored.

The golden boot at EURO 2020 went to Cristiano Ronaldo, but the name engraved on that particular trophy could easily have read 'own goal' with 11 in total – two

more than in the previous 15 editions combined. With a further 14 goals coming following a rebound, whipping in crosses was a particularly productive route to goal. "When the cross is outside of the goalkeeper's reach, nine times out of ten it is a goal," said technical observer Frans Hoek, himself a former goalkeeper. "At such a high speed, whoever touches that ball, it will go in."

This is where fast, technically gifted players come into their own, as dribbling came back into fashion. "This is the EURO of dribbling," said Fabio Capello. "Finally, we can see young players going one on one, trying to dribble their opponents to get to the goal line and cross dangerously." Italy's Federico Chiesa and Lorenzo Insigne and England's Raheem Sterling showed signs of resuscitating a calibre of player who causes the greatest level of excitement among fans, and strikes the most fear into full-backs. "In Italy,

we are very lucky in this period to have these players," added Capello, who felt Sterling had also "made the difference" for England. "The movement is really important, but so too is that they are taking the risk to dribble," added the former England manager.

These were all among the key take-aways from an event which spanned 11 venues spread across the continent, from Glasgow to Baku and St Petersburg to Sevilla, and are discussed in greater depth in the UEFA EURO 2020 technical report. 🌱



"When Belgium had [Romelu] Lukaku in the middle of the pitch in the first half, Simon Kjær handled him well and then the coach changed, moved [Kevin] de Bruyne into the centre and Lukaku destroyed Denmark out there – Bingo!"

Peter Rudbæk  
Technical observer





ROBERTO MANCINI

# SMELLS LIKE TEAM SPIRIT

The EURO 2020 winning coach reveals how Italy made it back to the top after a disappointing few years.

**T**ake a look at your favourite league table and work out how many of the coaches were top-level players. And how many have become successful coaches without an illustrious playing career. One of football's great debating points is whether one background is better than the other. Do great footballers make great coaches? Or, as Arrigo Sacchi famously argued, "You don't have to have been a horse to be a jockey." Italy's coaching guru could be cited alongside the likes of José Mourinho, André Villas-Boas or Maurizio Sarri as examples of a coaching vocation weighing more heavily than playing experience as a top-level pro.

"This is a group that has never lost heart, even in difficult times, supporting each other and putting the interest of the team before the individual. If we are where we are today, it's not only because of an extra penalty scored. It's because we have been transformed by our friendship – one of the most beautiful feelings in life." The words, not spoken by Roberto Mancini but by his captain, Giorgio Chiellini, reflect the team spirit built by a coach who took the baton at a delicate moment in the wake of Italy's historic failure to qualify for the 2018 World Cup.

Victory at EURO 2020 also reaffirmed the notion that 'team spirit' has the same relevance in the team behind the team as among the players themselves. Mancini embarked on his renaissance project with the support of former team-mates such as Alberico Evani, Fausto Salsano, Giulio Nucciari and Angelo Gregucci, with his striking partner in the great Sampdoria team of the '90s, Gianluca Vialli, as head of delegation. Clips of their touchline celebrations bear witness to the passion and commitment that unites them.

**How important was team spirit? And what did you do to create it?**

They did well because they formed a good group of guys – great guys first and foremost, which was essential. Plus, the more experienced players helped the younger players to integrate. That was also quite simple, and they deserve a lot of credit for creating a group that really wanted to play good football. It's not that I felt everything would be easy because there are always difficulties, but we made it. We were together for 50 days, which was tough, but I have to say that it all went fast. That's a sign that the guys got on well with each other.

**You also implemented a more positive style, focused on attacking. How difficult was it to do this after the disappointment of 2018?**

It was actually quite simple, because I found players who wanted to do something special. They were enthusiastic about the project because it was something different for them. They were curious to see what we Italians could do. Obviously it took some time, but not that much. Whenever we got to see each other, it went well because they got something special out of it.

**Italy was able to adapt tactically to different opponents. As you don't work with the players as frequently as you would at club level, how did you manage to prepare different tactical systems?**

It was a group effort. We tried to work on different ways of playing as well as the physical fitness side.

We tried to improve our qualities as individuals and as a team. We succeeded, all together – us, the staff, and the players, because they showed a lot of desire.

**How important was it for the group that you could make five or six substitutions?**

I think it was important for everyone because the players had all just come off the end of an exhausting season, so I think it was a very good thing. We'd been working as a group for a long time and the guys who came off the bench knew what to do. Indeed, I have to say that whenever they came on, they gave something more, because when a tired player came off, a fresh player came on with a desire to improve the team – and that's not always the case. I have to say they were excellent, everyone, every time – in each game, those who came on did something special. It's important that the identity of the team remains the same even when we change three or four players. They all know what to do and the end product does not change.

**Everybody sets out to win. But at what point did you think you could go all the way?**

I always believed it was possible to win – I believed it from day one. But there are lots of other factors as well. We knew what we were doing, even during the

qualification phase, and we believed it was possible to do something special. The teams who played in the EURO were all very strong and they all wanted to win, so there was a good balance. I think at the moment there are many strong teams in Europe who could have won the EURO and who could win the World Cup. Winning wasn't a simple task.

**What were the key moments?**

We really believed in what we had done in the lead-up to the EURO but, of course, the important – crucial – match was the first. In a knockout competition, the first is always the most difficult. But then when you settle into it, it becomes different.

**Maybe the performance against Belgium showed your confidence and physical condition?**

I think that was a very important match. The final against England was a great match, too. We suffered a bit more against Spain, because they played probably their best match of the whole tournament and they are a very strong team. I think that, from the round of 16 onwards, they were all great matches. There are some games when you have to suffer. Spain surprised us at the start by deciding to play without a striker. They caused us a lot of trouble and we had a hard time because we didn't have much of the ball.

**Is there a lesson that EURO 2020 taught you?**

That you never give up until the end. It's not something we learned at EURO 2020, but it's something that was confirmed there. When you play you should always believe in your abilities and your qualities, because every match starts 0-0, and then you never give up for any reason because in today's football, you can always make a comeback.

**Did you see any tactical trends that could be useful in coach education?**

I think every coach played to attack and to win, so this is the trend to follow. Because at a European level, if you follow this trend and have quality players, you can win. You can change the formation or the way you play, but in the end, you have the pitch and 11 players. So it comes down to mentality and desire to win – even if you're giving more opportunities to the opponent by giving them more space. I believe this is the foundation of it all. 🇮🇹





# THE EURO GOAL STATS

Here is how and when the EURO goals were scored, and which players ran the fastest and covered the most ground.

## GOALSCORING

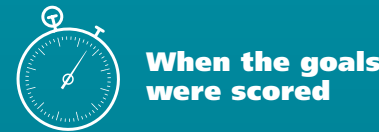
### SET-PLAY GOALS

ACTION	GUIDELINES	GROUP STAGE	KNOCKOUT STAGE	TOTAL
Direct free-kick	Direct from a free-kick		1	1
Corner	Direct from or following a corner	12	5	17
Penalty	Spot kick (or follow-up from a penalty)	9	2	11
Indirect free-kick	Following a free-kick	5	3	8
Throw-in	Following a throw-in	2	1	3
		28	12	40

### OPEN-PLAY GOALS

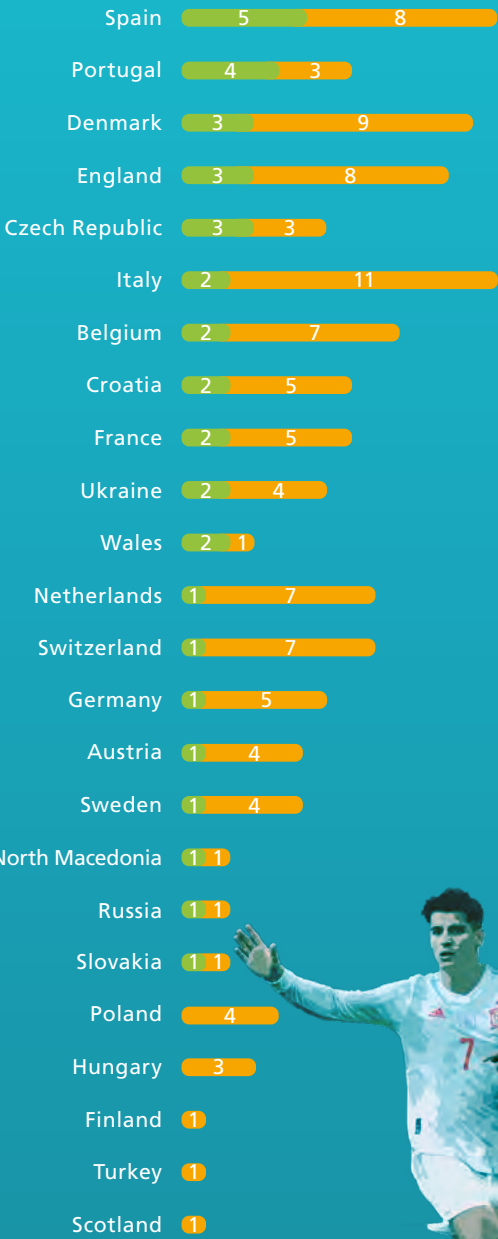
ACTION	GUIDELINES	GROUP STAGE	KNOCKOUT STAGE	TOTAL
Combinations	Build-up with passes and link-up play	39	22	61
Counterattack	Immediate transition from breaking up opponents' attack	7	1	8
Defensive error	Mistake by defender or goalkeeper	8	5	13
Direct attack	Quick attack with few passes, as a transition or from own defence	9	8	17
Other	Belonging to more than one category	3		3
		66	36	102

TOTAL		94	48	142
Avg. goals per game		2.61	3.2	2.79

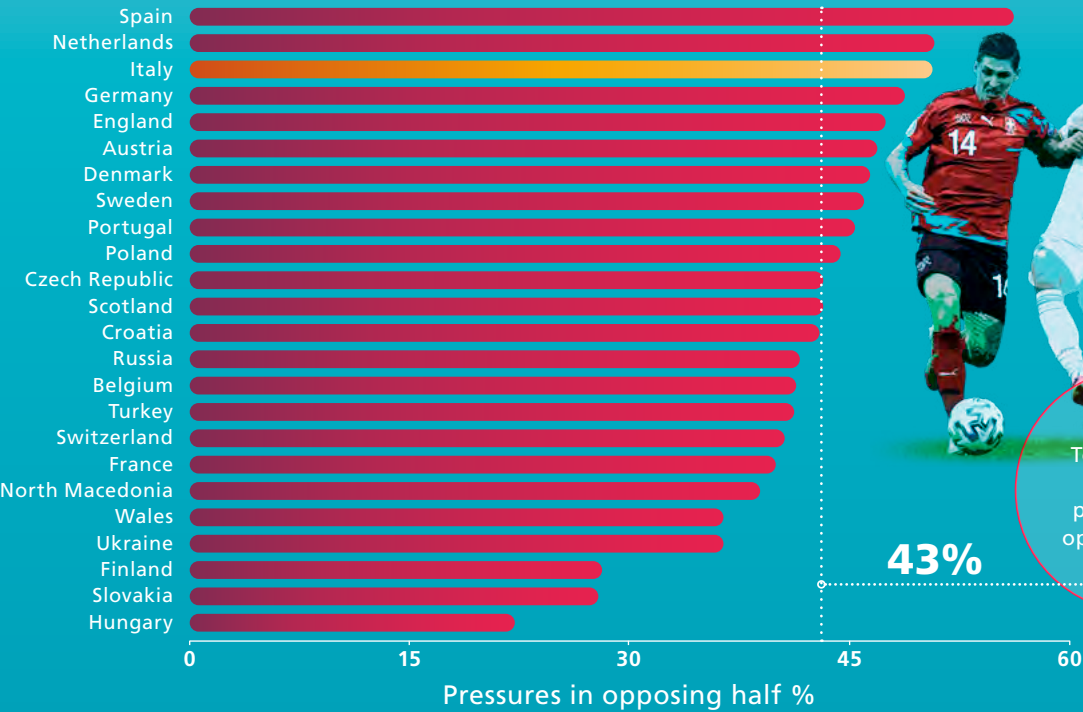


## GOALS SCORED

■ Set play ■ Open play



## PRESSING



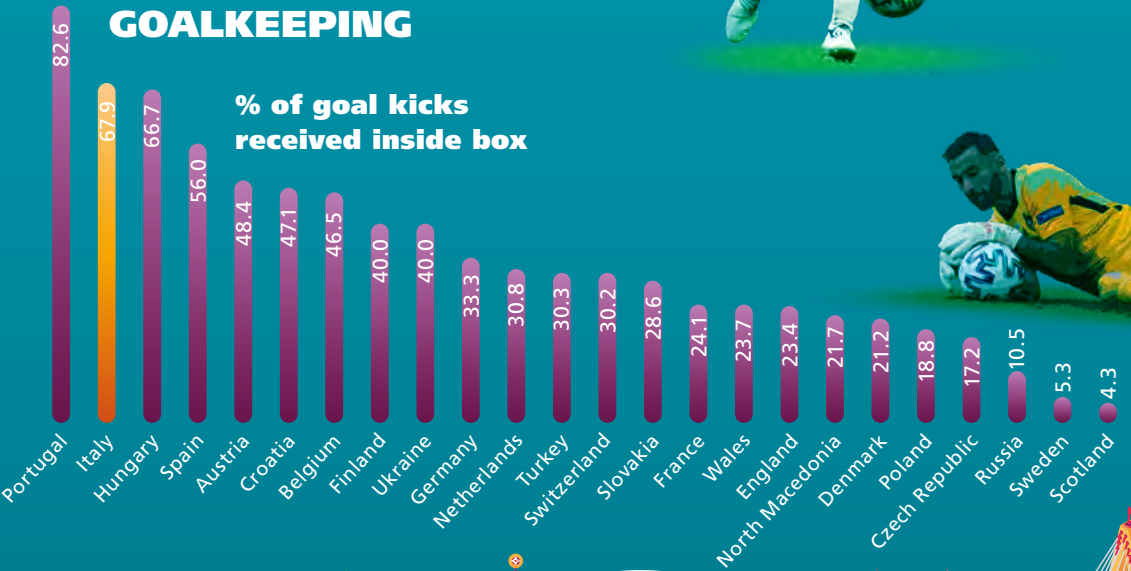
## SPEED

PLAYER	TEAM	TOP SPEED km/hr
Spinazzola	Italy	33.77
Négo	Hungary	33.77
Coman	France	33.66
Gakpo	Netherlands	33.59
James	Wales	33.52
Rashford	England	33.52
Pukki	Finland	33.30
A. Christensen	Denmark	33.30
Ilorente	Spain	33.30
Gvardiol	Croatia	33.30

## DISTANCE

PLAYER	TEAM	AVG.PER GAME (km)
Pedri	Spain	12.69
Jorginho	Italy	12.35
Marcel Sabitzer	Austria	12.19
Aleksandr Golovin	Russia	11.99
Kalvin Phillips	England	11.84
Albin Ekdal	Sweden	11.80
Sergio Busquets	Spain	11.70
Ádám Nagy	Hungary	11.59
Tomáš Souček	Czech Republic	11.57
N'Golo Kanté	France	11.55

## GOALKEEPING





# FITNESS AND THE COACH

UEFA injects a fitness competence framework into coach education

**L**et's tour the clubs of Europe asking two simple questions: how much do coaches know about football fitness training? And, secondly, how much should coaches know about football fitness training? The answers could probably be compiled into a decent-sized book. At the top clubs where specialists abound, you might hear

"oh, I leave that to the fitness coach" or words to that effect. But, as you descend the footballing pyramid, the answers take on a radically different tone. We soon reach levels where the concept of a fitness coach might appear on wish lists. And the coaches with UEFA C or UEFA B diplomas working in grassroots football probably won't even waste time on wishes. At



Football training in Valladolid, Spain.



At these lower levels, the lack of support from specialist staff means that coaches theoretically require a much broader armoury, including a good knowledge of football fitness. They may not need to know more about fitness training than the elite frontline coaches at Pro level but they will certainly have to do more fitness training than their illustrious colleagues. Then there are coaches – maybe with UEFA Elite Youth diplomas – who need to steer players through the adolescent years when, in any given group of players, physical maturation progresses at different speeds. Then there are the coaches who need to understand the different physical parameters of women’s football. Or the special requirements attached to the fitness coaching of goalkeepers.

The aim of that rambling opening paragraph is to illustrate the complexity

of the topic and highlight a major step forward: the launch of the new UEFA fitness competence framework as a complement to the UEFA Coaching Convention.

**Back to the 90s**

For some time, many national associations have been seeking guidance on the fitness components of their coach education courses. UEFA’s interest in the subject certainly goes back a long way. Back to the 1990s when Denmark’s Jens Bangsbo at the University of Copenhagen published Fitness Training in Football – A Scientific Approach and collaborated with UEFA at workshops and symposiums before joining the coaching staff at Juventus under Carlo Ancelotti and Marcello Lippi and going on to play a similar role with the Denmark national team. Since then, it has been a

question of keeping pace with the rapid, not to say explosive, evolution of fitness training principles and sports science, which coaches like Sir Alex Ferguson, Roy Hodgson and many others signal as the greatest change noted during their careers.

In the UEFA context, much credit is also due to Andreas Morisbak of Norway, who was a prime mover in UEFA’s first fitness for football initiatives and an enthusiastic promoter of the principle of football specificity in physical preparation, whereby training activities should be as similar as possible to the competitive situations in terms of design and the demands made on the body during real match play. He firmly believed that fitness training should be football-specific and not isolated from the skills and decision-making learning processes associated with the game.

**A need for standardisation**

UEFA’s initial searches for a degree of standardisation revealed enormous diversities across the map of Europe at a time when the rapid advances in sports science represented an invitation to step away from traditional pathways – an invitation which, in all walks of life, is often accepted with a degree of reluctance

UEFA’s initial searches for a degree of standardisation revealed enormous diversities across the map of Europe at a time when the rapid advances in sports science represented an invitation to step away from traditional pathways – an invitation which, in all walks of life, is often accepted with a degree of reluctance or not accepted at all.



Andreas Morisbak of Norway promotes the principle that fitness training should be football-specific.



or not accepted at all. This explains why the introduction of a fitness competence framework has taken time and a great deal of painstaking work, research and consultation. Feedback from a survey conducted among national associations served to clarify their requirements. Many asked for support material and knowledge-sharing seminars or workshops allied with guidelines that would allow their coach educators to upgrade the knowledge and competence of football coaches at all levels in fitness matters.

No fewer than 51 national associations took part in the survey, which also featured 35 follow-up interviews. Just over half (51% to be pedantic) reported that between 76% and 100% of their professional clubs currently employ full-time fitness coaches. On the other hand, almost 40% of the national associations stated that there was no minimum requirement to operate as a fitness coach – maybe slightly surprising bearing in mind that technicians, physios or team doctors all need qualifications. Among those who do have requirements, only 18% demand a UEFA coaching licence, whereas 43% require a degree in sports science. The survey also revealed that 16 associations have embraced the need to formalise the education of fitness coaches and have developed their own national fitness diplomas. On the other hand, 35 have not. However, 25 of the latter added that they have plans to do so in the future. Interestingly, some associations have introduced fitness diplomas as a further education or continuing professional development (CPD) add-on for existing UEFA licence holders.

The status quo in coach education is

that only a few national associations do not engage a fitness specialist in their UEFA A and Pro courses, with over half of them clearly recognising the important relationship between football and fitness by adding that their specialised fitness educators are in possession of UEFA coaching diplomas.

**Fitness for football advisory group**

In the meantime, UEFA had decided to move forward by inviting a team of leading specialists to form a fitness for football advisory group – a team of seven (five men and two women) captained by Paul Balsom, widely respected as Leicester City’s head of performance innovation for 13 years, in addition to a long list of

World Cups and European Championships as the Sweden national team’s performance manager. The advisory group’s brief was basically to sharpen ideas, pinpoint the key concepts and set them out in a readily understandable fashion. The aim was to define minimum levels of content and competences that coaches with UEFA-endorsed diplomas should possess; to align with contemporary thinking on football fitness education at all levels; and to respect the reality-based learning that the UEFA Coaching Convention has been built on. The result is a framework which outlines, diploma by diploma, the basic guiding principles for the fitness component in coach education courses – a core structure which national associations can furnish to their own taste to incorporate their own underlying principles and identity.

The next step was to present the framework to UEFA’s 55 member associations – initially via documents offering guidance on the topics to be delivered during coach education courses and, early in 2021, by a 90-minute online launch attended by 160 participants. This allowed technical directors and coach education specialists to be properly warmed up for a series of webinars which all national associations were invited to attend – and did. To make them user-friendly, the 55 were split into three groups involving three to six coach education specialists from 16 to 20 associations: in one group, those who already deliver their national fitness diplomas; in another, →







France get ready for EURO 2020 action.

those who are considering doing so; and, finally, those who are not. All these webinars were genuinely interactive, embracing UEFA adult learning principles, and gave all national associations a real opportunity to contribute to the roll-out of this milestone in football fitness.

The follow-up was a series of 90-minute best practice forums, drawing on the impressive experience and existing delivery from various national associations. These were organised on a weekly basis during April 2021, with the online doors open to all.

**Integrating the framework**

In the autumn, on-site presential meetings were allowed to resume – which paved the way for a series of fitness for football seminars staged under the UEFA Share banner, where small groups of national associations get together for three days in a host association for an interactive knowledge-sharing programme – with

members of the fitness for football advisory group on hand to offer advice and guidance on how best to inject the framework principles into the various diploma courses organised by the individual associations. These workshops are not traditional education courses, but rather reflect, respect and exploit, in highly interactive and open environments, the extensive experience which exists in member associations.

The result of all this was a great deal of feedback from national associations which have welcomed the initiative and are committed to integrating the framework into their coach education programmes. Some of their concerns highlighted the value of the seminars and the best practice interchanges on aspects such as how to do justice to the fitness components in UEFA C courses which adhere to the minimum duration of 60 hours. Or how best to prepare C diploma coaches for work with diverse end-user groups in

terms of age, gender and so on, enabling players to experience the health benefits of regular football and enhance their feeling of well-being – all of which offered encouragement for UEFA to publish support material on a community page. On the higher rungs of the UEFA diploma ladder, where relationships among the team behind the team take on greater relevance, one of the key factors for the coach is to have enough knowledge to achieve maximum cooperation with fitness specialists and, of course, to avoid conflicts.

**Isolation v integration**

Indeed, one of the important areas in the fitness framework (at all levels) is the isolation v integration question. To what extent should fitness work be done as isolated sessions? In other words, how often do you take your players – or let the fitness coach take them – for isolated physical exercising which is maybe not the

most pleasurable pastime for the average player, especially at grassroots levels? To what extent can you take an integrated approach and achieve the same fitness benefits by designing more enjoyable drills with the ball? What is your attitude to isolated fitness sessions for individual players? How much work should your players do in the gym? The UEFA Share sessions are sure to generate healthy debate over the extent to which different associations promote isolated v integrated approaches.

**The impact of playing styles**

The fundamental aim of the framework is to develop coaches who understand and are comfortable with the physical

demands of football and who, when structuring football training programmes, will confidently account for the physical demands to produce performance-related plans which also mitigate risks of injury. So coach education needs to cover the principles of load management and, at the top end of the game, this entails a familiarisation with the technologies now available to monitor physical parameters during training and match play. And, right across the board from UEFA C onwards, this involves assessments based on the minimum dose concept of calculating the amount of physical output required in order to achieve objectives. Chris Barnes, a member of the advisory group, explains: “The coach should have a

multidisciplinary (technical, tactical and physical) approach to designing training sessions. If all goals can be effectively achieved in a 60-minute training session, coaches shouldn’t be led to deliver longer sessions merely to keep players on the field for longer durations. It makes sense to aim for the minimum rather than create overloads.” This interlocks with coach education aspects such as periodisation (designing weekly, monthly and seasonal training programmes), taking into account the impact of playing styles and job descriptions for individual playing positions on physical demands or, in the upper echelons of the game, considerations like adjusting training loads for non-playing substitutes.

**The grassroots question**

Monitoring physical condition is evidently more of a challenge at grassroots levels where technological backup is less prevalent. One approach at this level is the use of rating of perceived exertion (RPE) questionnaires, an inexpensive tool which provides coaches with objective feedback on the demands of training drills and sessions, with plenty of online backup

“The coach should have a multidisciplinary (technical, tactical and physical) approach to designing training sessions. If all goals can be effectively achieved in a 60-minute training session, coaches shouldn’t be led to deliver longer sessions merely to keep players on the field for longer durations.”

**Chris Barnes**  
Member of the fitness for football advisory group



Olympique Lyonnais’ Amel Majri working with a fitness coach.



available. Ditto fitness tests such as Yo-Yo or 505 runs, where there is no shortage of online data to help coaches measure their players' conditioning against similar groups elsewhere.

For the fitness competence framework to be a valuable tool, it has to cater for the coach educators working across the full spectrum of UEFA diplomas. This means that the framework offers detailed guidance in eight different categories – the four core diplomas and the four specialised areas covering youth development and goalkeeping.

The fitness components in the UEFA Youth B and UEFA Elite Youth A courses are evidently more focused on the demands coaches face while working with players at crucial stages of physical development and maturation when they need to negotiate transitions from youth to elite youth and/or elite youth to senior professional football. One of the main challenges facing coaches in this domain is managing the wide range of individual differences in growth and development. There are specific challenges in this adolescent sector of the game – among them, for instance, developing and maintaining match fitness for elite players who may have progressed into senior squads but, as regular occupants of the bench, may have to cope with deficits in playing time. In the youth development area, debates on the isolation v integration dilemma tend to have greater frequency and relevance at a stage where the coach

needs to find a nice balance between isolated and integrated work on strength, speed and agility. A further debating point is whether youth players should be trained for a specialised job description or equipped to cope with the physical demands of various playing positions. And, for coaches of youth teams, there is the perennial challenge of reconciling long-term player development aspects with the short-term requirements of winning matches.

### Age-limit considerations

One of the most frequent talking points in UEFA's technical reports on age-limit tournaments has been the emphasis on selecting players from the top end of the chronological parameters – a tendency which reaches as high up the ladder as Under-21 level. As recently as 2019, players born in the first three months of the year accounted for 33% of the workforce at the final tournament, as opposed to the 17% with dates of birth between October and December. Many national associations are already implementing programmes aimed at combating a trend which suggests that talent is being allowed to slip through fingers. But it remains an issue that youth development coaches need to address.

Feedback from the national associations yielded a number of proposals that UEFA has taken on board: the creation of educational materials focusing on the management of issues related to the periods of peak growth and development;

and the sharing of best-practice principles, videos, presentations and reference material on youth football on the UEFA fitness community page, an invitation-only platform to which the technicians from national associations have exclusive access.

### The special case of the goalkeeper

And then there are the goalkeepers. Nowadays, they spend more and more time training with the rest of the squad thanks to a marked shift away from 'traditional' attitudes over recent years. But the keeper is still a 'special case'. As Chris Barnes points out: "In physical terms, the goalkeeper reverses the parameters that govern the rest of the group. For the outfield players, the heaviest physical load



Unai Simón training with Spain at the UEFA Nations League finals.



Sarina Wiegman, head coach of European Champions the Netherlands, taking part in a youth training session at Utrecht.

There is currently a shortfall in the numbers of female coach educators, while not all male coach educators feel equipped or comfortable in dealing with the specificities of women's physical preparation.

is on matchday. But for the goalkeeper it can be the easiest day of the week. This obviously impacts on the goalkeeper coaches' planning, as they need to think carefully about the best days to programme sessions which might be heavy physically and/or technically demanding." To quote from the Goalkeeper A diploma section of the framework, the coach should be able to "design and deliver effective goalkeeper training programmes that are flexible enough to meet both the individual needs of the goalkeeper and the global needs of the team".

One of the related issues expressed by national associations is the scarcity of benchmarks when it comes to monitoring the physical performance of goalkeepers at the various levels of the game. And the periodisation of keepers' training programmes was a topic which generated discussion. The feeling was, once again, that the sharing of knowledge and experience among national associations pays big dividends.

### A framework for women too

Fitness in women's football was another important aspect to emerge while the framework was under construction. Performance parameters and injury patterns are evidently different but, surveying the full spectrum of eight UEFA diplomas, many associations voiced, during the launch phase of the framework, concerns about a lack of specific reference data and wondered how best to promote further research – maybe in collaboration with universities. In terms of applying the principles outlined in the framework to the women's game, there is currently a shortfall in the numbers of female coach educators, while not all male coach educators feel equipped or comfortable in dealing with the specificities of women's physical preparation – which means that, at the moment, national associations may need to rely on external specialists. Hence UEFA's initiative of setting up an advisory group to address these issues, headed by Anna Signeul, who led Scotland to a first-

ever appearance at the Women's EURO finals in 2017 and is currently in charge of the national team in Finland. The aim is to integrate women's football content into each UEFA coaching diploma. This takes on even greater relevance in the wake of a decision taken in April by the coach education experts on UEFA's Jira Panel to mandate the fitness for football advisory group to work towards the introduction of specialist fitness diplomas. Foundations for this significant move are currently being laid by another UEFA working group.

In the meantime, the launch of the UEFA fitness competence framework is a key milestone in its mission to encourage coaches to acquire greater understanding of the physical demands of training and match play and deliver physical development programmes that align with contemporary thinking, take into account players' individual abilities and help to mitigate the risk of injury. It is 20 years since Ric Charlesworth, in his book *The Coach: Managing for Success*, wrote: "A manager must optimise athletes' capacities with a training, learning and counselling regime. The coach must absorb scientific data and apply them to the best effect using judgement and finesse." Since the publication of that book, sports science has evolved at great pace. But the words remain equally valid. 🍏



Hydration is just as important to physical fitness as exercise.





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