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TACTICAL ANALYSIS OF ELITE FOOTBALL TEAMS – A MIXED METHOD APPROACH

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Introduction

Soccer is a game with a random intermittent nature, whereby critical elements of the game are sometimes determined by chance. Research on match analysis in this sport has been mainly focused on the description of physical, physiological and technical game actions as an attempt to quantify the activity of players. Less work has been carried out on the match activities of soccer players, particularly the quantification of fundamental movement patterns of players during offensive sequences of play (for review see Sarmiento et al. (2014)).

Objectives

This study aimed to detect and analyse regular patterns of play in the counterattack of football teams, through the combination of the sequential analysis technique and interviews to first League Portuguese coaches.

Method

A mixed method design (QUAL/QUAL) was used. In a first stage 36 games (12 per team) of the BA, IM and MU teams were encoded using the observational instrument developed by Sarmiento et al. (2010), and the data analyzed through the SDIS-GSEQ software. Based on the detected patterns, semi-structured interviews were carried out to 8 expert high-performance football coaches and data were analysed through the content analysis technique (Nvivo9).

Results and discussion

The analysis of the results concerning the start of the offensive process through ball recovery possession by the goal keeper has allowed to verify that in Manchester United team, there is a tendency for these attack sequences being developed through the defensive central zone ($Z=5.52$) and through both the right

side zones of the defensive midfielder, zone 3 ($Z=5.26$) and zone 6 ($Z=3.35$), through the execution of the forward pass ($Z=2.00$). Also in Barcelona's team, a tendency towards the offensive sequence was observed to be developed mainly in the central areas, zone 2 ($Z=5.52$) and zone 5 ($Z=3.42$) and in the right side zone of the defensive midfielder, zone 6 ($Z=2.55$), by the execution of technical actions such as dribble ($Z=2.47$) and conduction of the ball ($Z=2.72$), allowing a quick transition from defense to offence, trying to take advantage from the favorable interaction contexts characterized by the numerical equality ($Z=1.96$). The analysis of the IM data has allowed to verify several regularities that distinguishes this team from the other two. After the ball recovery possession by the GK, the ball reposition is performed using a long ($Z=2.74$) and high ($Z=3.16$) pass, probably with the purpose of exploring the advance of the opponent team lines, and also the lack of organization from the opponent team, allowing a quick transition to the offensive midfielder, zone 8 ($Z=2.08$) and zone 11 ($Z=2.06$), unlike what seems to be the practice in BA and IM teams as previously described. Concerning the results obtained from the retrospective sequential analysis, following as criteria behaviour the shot with goal scored we have concluded that in BA team, this pattern is activated by the crossing ($Z=2.82$), the high ($Z=3.05$) diagonal pass to the back ($Z=3.16$) and by areas belonging to the offensive sector - Zone 10 ($Z=3.00$); Zone 11 ($Z=1.96$) and Zone 12 ($Z=1.96$) - when in numeric inferiority ($Z=2.12$). The pattern observed for MU leads us to believe that there are "barriers" that the team cannot overcome with the same efficiency as the BA team, which can be justified by the opponents' failed intervention ($Z=3.50$), by the fact that the goal scored was preceded by a failed shot ($Z=2.60$), and by an action performed by the goal keeper ($Z=2.76$). Normally, and contrary to what happens with the other teams (IM and BA), the goal tends to be activated by areas of the central offensive midfield, Zone 8 ($Z=2.01$) and Zone 11 ($Z=2.76$). An interesting point comes from the analysis performed to IM data, and it is related with the fact that the goal being activated by the defensive midfield areas, Zone 1 ($Z=2.04$) and Zone 5 ($Z=2.85$). Therefore, before the shot with goal scored, the ball comes from within these areas, following situations where there is a failed intervention of the opponent ($Z=3.45$) or a pass to the back ($Z=3.74$) in zone 10. A similar tendency is observed on the other teams, which also develop their counterattacks in a progressive action along the field area. This difference is perceived by the coaches interviewed as a result of the different game models of each team has, which strategically enhance their players' capacities.

Conclusions

Considering the above mentioned, this present study sought to contribute with a differentiated perspective on the subject of game analysis, using data collection and analysis technics (sequential analysis and qualitative content analysis) which have not been used frequently in this particular context. The potential in the combination of these types of analysis are evident because it allows detecting and analysing regular behaviour structures (game patterns) which assume a practical application to coaches, but also because the content analysis which resulted from the semi-structured interviews performed to experienced coaches, has allowed complementing this approach with the know-how of the experts in the field, which goes a bit further from the traditional researches undertaken exclusively by scholars.

Bibliography

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