

SCORING GOALS FROM SET PLAYS

Creative Set Plays of English Premier League Teams



VOLUME 1

by Luca Bertolini



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Table of contents

Set play: definitions and types	4
English Premier League set plays data	15
Set plays analysis	20
Long distance free kicks	21
Free kicks far away in the center (or through the center)	24
Throw-ins	37
Goals after winning the second times of the ball	58
Summary	75

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Set play: definitions and types

This book can't start with anything but the most famous crucial and tricky set-piece of soccer's recent history; the fourth goal that Liverpool scored against Barcelona last 7th May 2019 to complete the 2nd leg return after conceding 3 goals in the first leg at Camp Nou.



Luckily or unfortunately, this was an exception that proves the rule.



But this is an essential fact to understand what set plays mean for players: attention, awareness, reaction speed (the ball is momentarily out of play, but it will be sooner or later.)



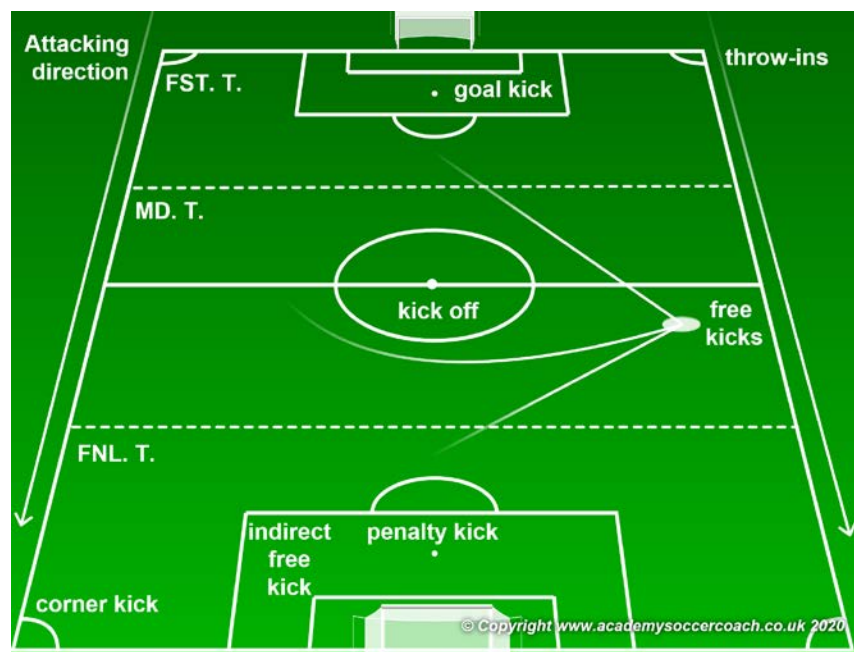
That is all what Trent-Alexander Arnold, the fullback who kicked the corner, and Divok Origi, the scorer, showed, and that 8 Barcelona's players and the goalkeeper didn't do in that situation.



Let's now have a look to the type of set plays and their definitions. Set-plays (or set-pieces) are the actions of putting the ball back into the field when it is out of play.

They include:

- Kick off = the game starts (1st half / 2nd half).
- Goal kicks = put the ball back in play after being out of the end lines.
- **Throw-ins (along the first, middle and final thirds)** = put the ball back in play from the side lines.



- **Free-kicks (direct or indirect, long distance, lateral, near in the center, far away in the center)** = the team of a players who has been fouled restart the playing phase of the game.



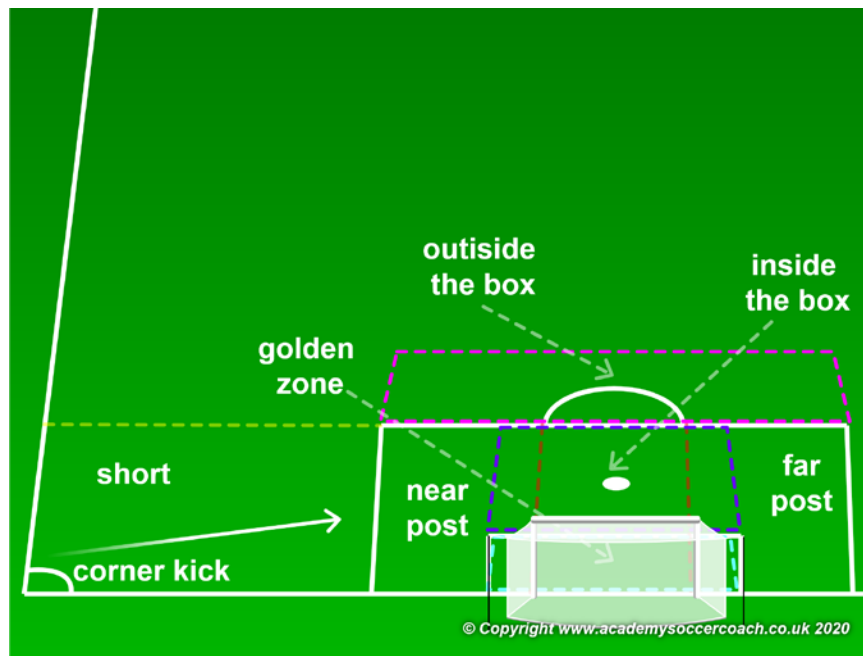
Analyzing 783 free kicks (124 matches at the 2010 FIFA World Cup, the final stages of the UEFA Champions League in 2010/11, and the 2010 UEFA European Championships), 36 indirect free kicks were needed to score a goal. The 64% of goals from indirect free kicks had a decisive influence on game outcome. Goals were more common when the attack was organized dynamically and three or four players touched the ball before a shot was taken, despite the first kick position in the field.

Indirect free kicks, more than the other types of set pieces (except corner kicks) are highly influenced by the time and the status of the match when the indirect free kick is taken, position and laterally of the kick, number of attackers and of defenders, interaction context, path and delivery area of the ball, type of marking, shooting area, offensive organization, type of shot. (**Source** - Effectiveness of Indirect Free Kicks in Elite Soccer by A. Claudio Casal, Rubén Maneiro, Toni Ardá, José L Losada & Antonio Rial)

These data are confirmed by another research about free kicks with a specific overview on corner kicks. Analyzing 1139 kicks taken in 124 matches (2010 FIFA World Cup - 64 matches, UEFA Euro 2012 - 31 matches, and the UEFA Champions League 2010-2011 - 29 matches), just 2.2% of the corners ended in goal; but these goals were responsible for the team winning or drawing the match on 76% of matches.

In general, these kicks were delivered through the air to the near post, with 1 or 2 intervening attackers, the attack were organized statically and the defense was a combination of zone and man-marking. The likelihood of a shot on goal or shot could be increased with the intervention of 3 or 4 attackers, a dynamic attack, and indirect delivery of the ball to the far post. (**Source** - Analysis of Corner Kick Success in Elite Football by Claudio A Casal, Rubén Maneiro, Toni Ardá, José L Losada & Antonio Rial.)

- **Corners (short, near post, far post, “golden zone”, inside the box, out of the box)** = when the ball is out of play (over the end line in the defensive half flied) because of a kick or a save of a defending team’s player.



During last 2018 Fifa World Cup, 600 corner kicks from all 64 matches in the tournament were obtained; 22 goals (3.7% of all corners kicks) were conceded from corner kicks and teams conceded more goals using a zonal marking strategy (6.0%) compared to a mixed marking strategy (3.7%). Most goals were conceded from inswing corner kicks (4.6%) compared to short (3.3%) and outswing (3.1%) corner kicks. 17 goal (3.9%) were conceded from corners when there were no players on the goal line and most goals came from the center (7.0%) and the first goalpost (3.5%).

- **Penalties** = a player of the attacking team has been fouled inside the opposition penalty area.
- Indirect free kicks inside the penalty area = the referees should assign them in favor of the attacking team when a defender makes a risky actions inside the penalty area to prevent the progression of an opponent’s action (without physical duel), when the goalkeeper has the ball in his hands for more than 6”, when he touches the ball again with his hands before it has been touched by another player and he has already had the possession, when he touches the ball with his hands after a voluntary pass of a teammate or when he touches the ball with his hands after he has received it directly from a throw-in.

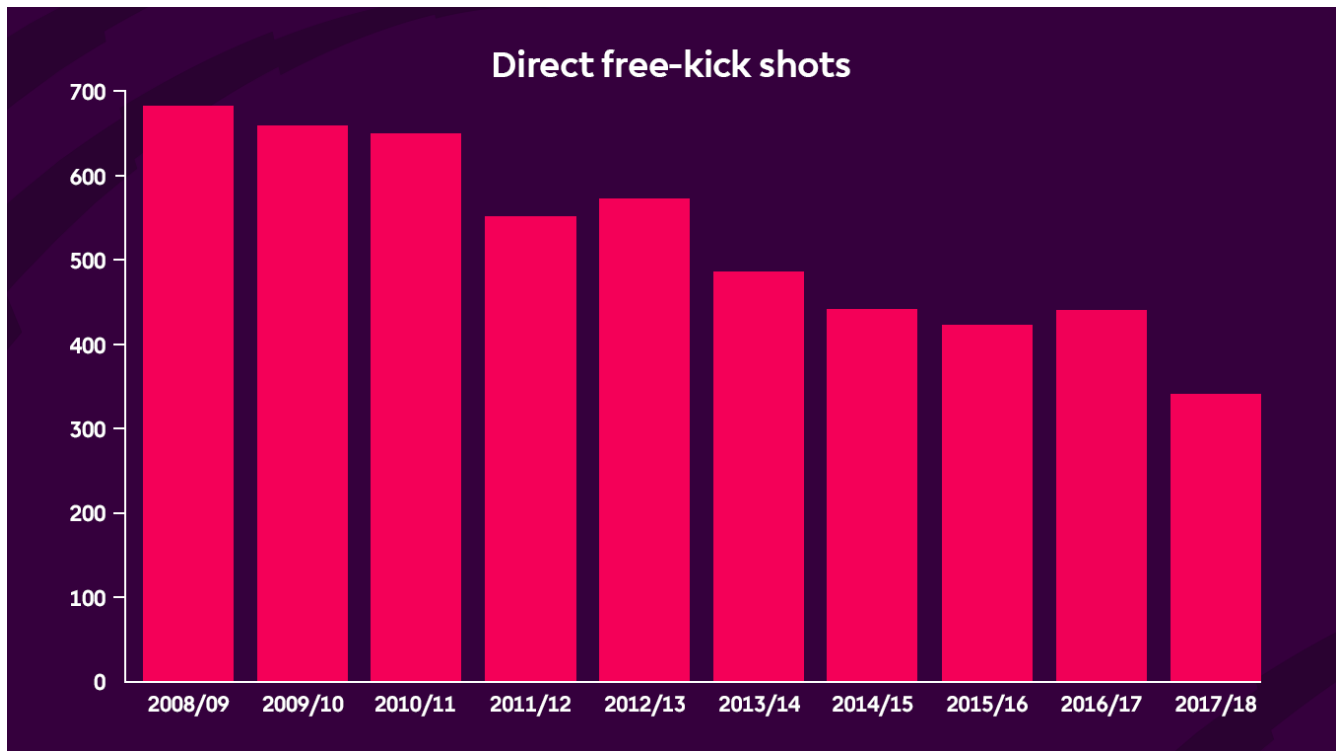
Set pieces often make the fortune of a team’s season, trigger important actions that unlock matches or facilitate goal scoring, and they can be vital factors to define the difference between saving the squad or relegation, qualification for international tournaments or mid-table positioning; they are different games, time to time, in the match.

In the 2016-2017 English Premier League season, 16% of all goals scored came from set-pieces (corners and free kicks). However, there is a great disparity in those numbers; during that season West Bromwich Albion scored 16 out of their 43 goals from set-pieces (>35% of their goals), but others obtained less than 7% of their goals from set-pieces (Sunderland scored 2 out of their 29 goals from set-pieces).

The gap in resources between the richest and poorest teams in world football is growing and the ability for a small market team to replicate the same goal that a high priced top player may score becomes crucial to cover the market inefficiency.

- A team is more likely to score from set-pieces compared to normal play possession (1.8% chance of scoring from set-pieces vs 1.1% in open play.)
- From free-kicks, teams are more likely to score by shooting directly, rather than crossing the ball (7.2% chance of scoring from shooting directly vs 1.1% chance from crossing the ball.) on the other side, the data of the last season in England do not confirm the tendency and demonstrate the essentiality of developing tactical solutions to make set plays efficient weapons.
- Teams are more likely to score from in-swinging corners (bottom teams) compared to out-swinging (top six teams) or driven corners (2.7% chance of scoring from in-swinging corners vs 2.2% from out-swinging.)
- In corners, a goal is more likely to occur from a shot from the second-ball rather than a shot directly (2.5% chance of scoring after winning the second ball vs 2.0% directly.)
- Success for the top-ranked team is usually associated with the dominance in transition moments. Higher ranked teams demonstrate control of set pieces and established offence, whereas lower ranked teams usually demonstrate poor performance in all moments of the game except established defense.
- In corners, a team is more likely to score from a flick-on compared to directly shooting from a corner (4.8% chance of scoring from a redirected corner vs 2.0% directly.)
- A set-piece specialist is more valuable to mid-to-low level teams, compared to high-level teams (an average set-piece taker will win a team 0.9 points while an elite set-piece taker will win 1.9 points; worth ~8% of a team's points for a bottom 6 team vs ~3.5% for a top 6 team.)

Despite this, direct shot free kicks seem to be a dying weapon for English teams:

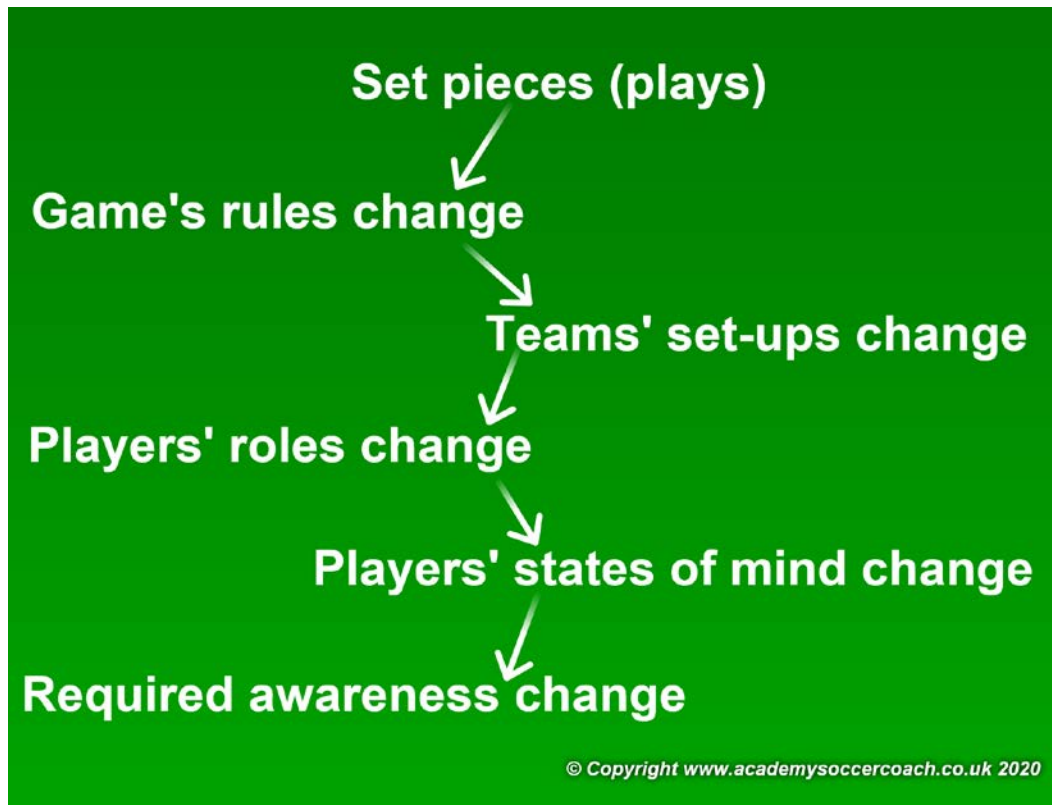


Only 16 direct free-kicks were scored this season, a record low by some distance. The lowest previous return from a full Premier League campaign was 25, in 2015/16. At first glance it appears that free-kick specialists are thin on the ground. Only 2 players scored more than once from a direct set-play: Marcos Alonso and Philippe Coutinho both scored twice. Just four players hit the target more than three times from their free-kicks as well. Of that quartet, only Kevin De Bruyne found the net. Direct free kicks on target (2017/18 season): Christian Eriksen (7), Kevin De Bruyne (5), Alexis Sanchez (5), and Willian (4) – Source: www.premierleague.com

Historical data confirm the direct free kicks' trend:

Season	Free-kick shots	Direct free-kick goals	% scored goals
2005/06	600	28	4,67
2008/09	682	33	5,50
2011/12	553	29	4,83
2014/15	441	27	4,50
2017/18	339	16	2,67

Why set-pieces are so decisive and crucial in a soccer match (42,3% of scored goals come from a set-piece)?



Game's rules change:

- The opponents must stay 10 y away from the ball (corner kicks and free kicks).
- The offside rule is not applied (corners, throw-ins and goal kicks).

Teams' set-ups change:

- The system of play and the tactical principles of attacking, defending and transitions' phases don't work anymore, as the ball is standing still and the play resumes only after the kick.
- Players' formation is different and it is related to the ball position, the type of set-piece, and the intentions of the team that can take advantage of the set-piece.

Players' roles change:

- Defenders, midfielders and attackers turn into kickers or throwers, headers or shooters and defenders. The players take on the roles in relation to specific skills: the best kicker or thrower, the best jumpers or shooters and the many players of the defending teams become markers (man-marking or zonal marking).

Players' states of mind change > Required awareness change:

- Set-pieces are usually highly schematized.
- Analysis and planning are usually very precise and peculiar.
- Players have different roles.
- Carrying out a set-piece requires a high level of synchronization.
- Awareness to opponents' and ball's positions.
- Awareness and understand where the opponent are moving to and how the set-piece is kicked.
- Feelings of danger and risk (defenders).

- Feelings of a crucial chance to score.

The consequence is that the **Game Changes** from **dynamic state** to a starting **static state**:

Soccer Dynamic State	Soccer Static State
Ball's speed requires players' specific roles in the field and crucial runs off the ball.	Players' mobility is not connected to their roles during play by play moments.
Runs off the ball are related to the opponents and the teammate with the ball.	To escape the markers and the runs off the ball are connected to the direct marker.
The players with the ball can't focus on the technical gestures because of the opponents.	The player with ball, who must kick or throw-ins it can focus on the technical gesture to perform thanks to the distance the opponents must respect.
The system and the tactical ideas influence the time of play and the space to occupy as well as the type of defensive actions.	There is no recognizable system of play.

Set-pieces and furthermore the free kicks are developed through three specific phases:

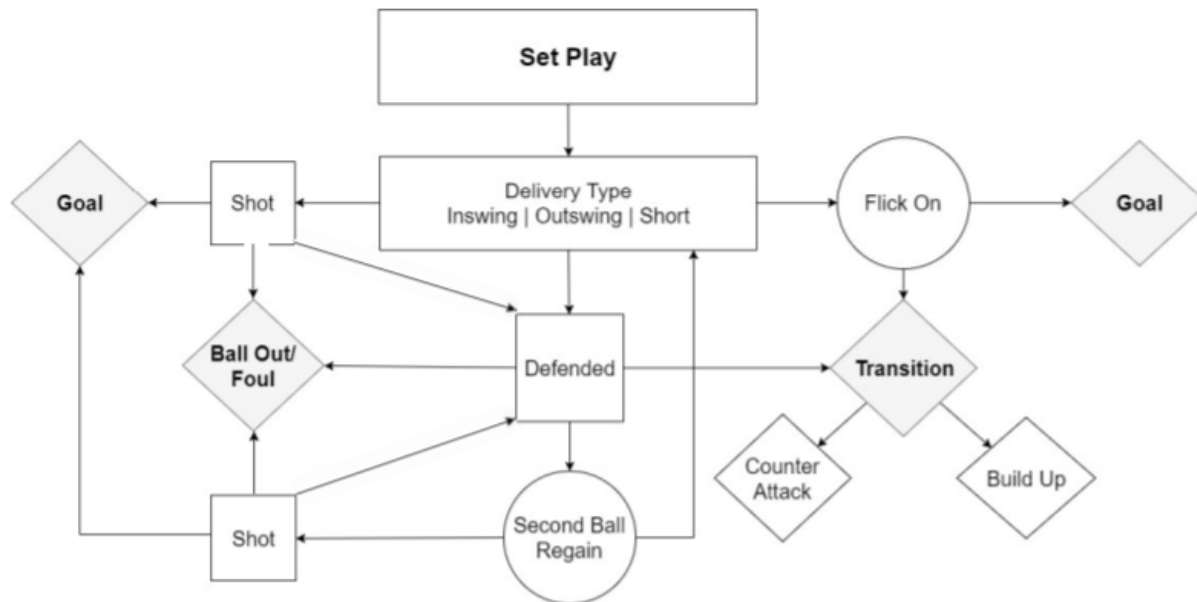
- **Strategy:** from the break of the phase of play to the moment when the player is going to kick or throw the ball in.
- **Tactics:** it is the moment before the ball is played.
- **Technical / Tactical Sequence:** as the ball is in play and the attacking team should take advantage of the two previous phases.

When set-pieces are played with aerial passes or kicks, headers often lead to ball losses (especially after goal kicks and throw-ins); a substantial amount of headers are performed to prevent spatial progress of opponents when employing direct attacks with long passes.

From this point of view, second times of the ball (offensive and defensive) become crucial and they lead to score a goal or to face counter-attacks because of opposition's unbalanced shapes.

The development of the game is influenced to various degrees by the sequences that follow the set plays regardless a goal is directly scored or not:

- Header purpose <> players' positions \geq **Large effect size.**
- Movement <> jump type \geq **Medium effect size.**
- Game state <> players' movement, game state <> jump type, position in the space <> opponents, header type + header purpose <> jump type, header purpose <> opponents, passes <> jump type, passes <> opponents, and pass <> players' position \geq **Small effect size.**



The large effects factors are confirmed, as instance by relation between the marking systems and the conceded goals; despite man-marking is usually preferred to zonal marking which is used less often, there aren't significant associations between the marking set-up and the number of goal scored conceded when defending corner kicks.

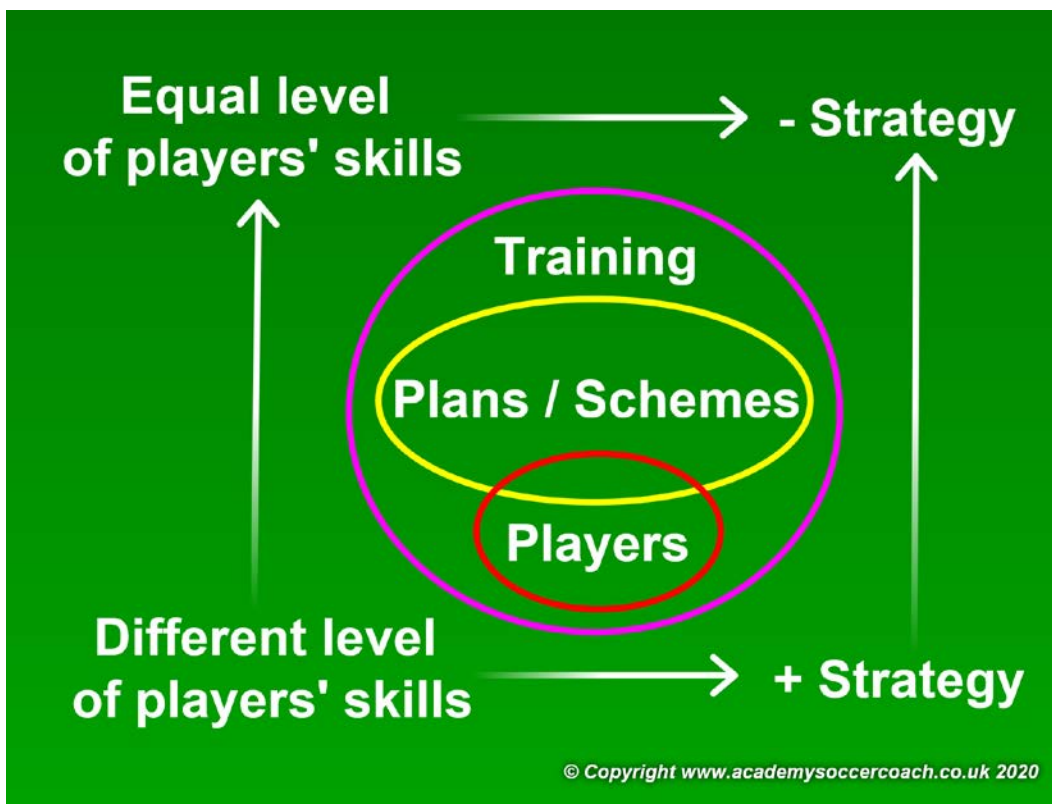
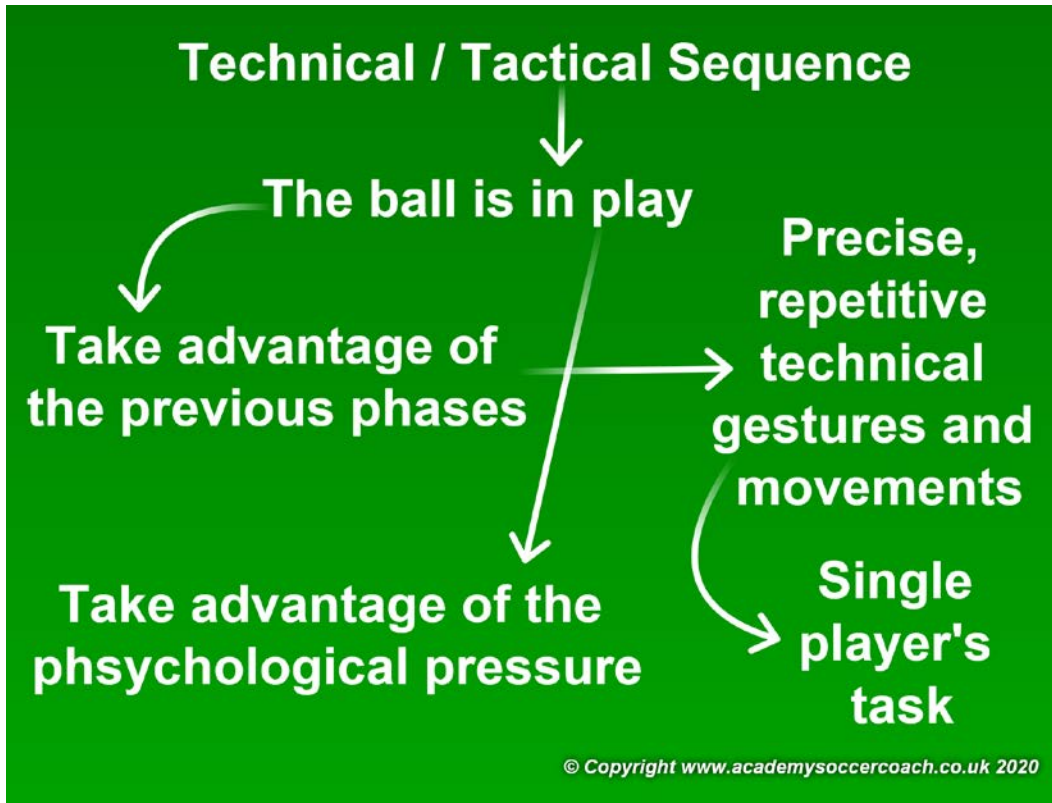
However, teams who applied zonal marking usually concede fewer goals and fewer attempts at goal than teams who used one-to-one marking; this means that the tactical intention and the technical skills of the players (header purpose) and their positions (attacking and furthermore defensive) are the larger effect sized factors on developments after set plays.

Analyzing 2,303 corner kicks (2015/2016 English Premier League season), top 6 teams favored out swinging deliveries with dynamic attacking organization during ball deliveries, whilst the bottom 6 teams favored in swinging deliveries and mixed static and dynamic attacking strategies in equal measure. Top 6 teams took corner kicks frequently when winning or drawing, whereas bottom 6 teams took most corner kicks when losing or drawing. Goals were usually scored from corner kicks when attacking organization was dynamic and 2 defenders were on the posts.

(**Source** - Comparative analysis of the top six and bottom six teams' corner kick strategies in the 2015/2016 English Premier League by Ben William Strafford, Adam Smith, Jamie Stephen North & Joseph Antony Stone.)

Then set plays strategic stage is anyway crucial.





English Premier League set plays data

2018/2019: This table outlines teams' performances in front of goal, from both open play and set piece situations.

Scores in front of a goal (2018/2019)									
	Set Play : Total	Open Play			Set Play				
Team	xG Ratio	Shots	xG	Goals	Shots	xG	Goals	%	Table Rank
Brighton & H.A.	0.32	237	19.82	16	128	11.38	14	87,50	17
Huddersfield T.	0.32	277	19.15	11	122	9.32	9	81,82	20
Cardiff City	0.44	248	21.11	19	165	18.96	11	57,89	18
Burnley	0.37	226	26.91	27	132	16.63	14	51,85	13
Everton	0.26	337	33.36	35	156	12.78	16	45,71	9
Bournemouth	0.21	300	35.32	35	137	11.32	13	37,14	16
Wolverhampton	0.21	335	38.64	31	138	11.19	11	35,48	10
Tottenham	0.21	389	40.77	46	144	11.66	16	34,78	4
Leicester City	0.20	372	37.22	32	136	10.41	11	34,38	6
Liverpool	0.19	426	54.29	59	142	14.39	20	33,90	2
Newcastle Utd	0.21	318	28.84	30	125	8.26	10	33,33	11
Watford	0.24	322	36.14	38	114	11.76	12	31,58	15
West Ham United	0.23	309	33.95	35	127	11.02	11	31,43	8
Manchester Utd	0.19	378	40.35	44	136	12.05	12	27,27	12
Crystal Palace	0.19	350	30.29	30	132	9.09	8	26,67	7
Arsenal	0.13	375	48.96	52	87	7.71	13	25,00	5
Southampton	0.21	343	33.78	32	135	10.03	8	25,00	14
Chelsea	0.18	481	44.66	46	121	10.70	10	21,74	3
Fulham	0.17	348	32.62	26	103	7.00	5	19,23	19
Manchester City	0.12	532	71.44	77	147	10.61	11	14,29	1

- Manchester City's ability to generate high quality chances from open play was demonstrated by amassing an xG output of 71.44. Their closest challenger both in this metric and league position, Liverpool, generated an output of 54.29.
- 44% of Cardiff City's xG output came from set pieces, the highest ratio in the league. Manchester City sits at the other end of the spectrum, having generated 88% of their xG output from open play.
- Exploring over performance against these metrics, four clubs scored at least two more goals than expected from set pieces, and in contrast four clubs also underperformed by at least two goals, most notably Cardiff City, who perhaps would have expected to score nearly eight more goals from the chances they generated from these situations.

- 4 of the last 5 teams and 2 of the 3 relegated teams scored more goals in front of the goals from set pieces than from open play.

2018/2019 tactical trends (opposition's own goals are excluded)

Team	Open Play	Counter Attack	Set Piece	Penalties	Total	% from set pieces	Table Rank
Liverpool	53	6	20	7	86	23,26	2
Tottenham	41	5	16	4	66	24,24	4
Everton	33	2	16	2	53	30,19	9
Burnley	26	1	14	2	43	32,56	13
Brighton	12	4	14	5	35	40,00	17
Arsenal	49	3	13	4	69	18,84	5
Bournemouth	26	9	13	7	55	23,64	16
Manchester United	40	4	12	9	65	18,46	12
Watford	35	3	12	1	51	23,53	15
Manchester City	72	5	11	3	91	12,09	1
West Ham	32	3	11	5	51	21,57	8
Wolverhampton	26	5	11	4	46	23,91	10
Leicester	24	8	11	5	48	22,92	6
Cardiff	19	0	11	3	33	33,33	18
Chelsea	45	1	10	5	61	16,39	3
Newcastle United	29	1	10	1	41	24,39	11
Huddersfield	10	1	9	1	21	42,86	20
Southampton	31	1	8	4	44	18,18	14
Crystal Palace	28	2	8	10	48	16,67	7
Fulham	24	2	5	2	33	15,15	19
Total			235		1040	22,60	

This scheme confirms how set-pieces are crucial for all the “types” of teams whether they are top teams or at the bottom of the table, but it indicates also that set plays are more essential for teams on the “right side” of the table, as they must usually reduce their technical and tactical lacks.

- The first team to be safe last season (Brighton) scored the 54,28% of the total amount of goals from set pieces.
- The first team to be relegated (Cardiff) scored the the 42% of the goals from set pieces.
- The last team of the table (Huddersfield) scored the 47,61 % of the only 21 goals from set pieces.
- Fulham was the only relegated team that scored goals from open play and that did not have relevant percentages of goals from set plays.

Just to make a brief comparison with the 2 first teams of the table, Manchester City scored only the 15,38% of goals from set-pieces; but Liverpool percentage increases to 31,39% of scored goals.

2018/2019 action and shot zones:

Team	Fst. T.	Mdl T.	FnL. T.
Manchester City	19%	46%	35%
Liverpool	23%	47%	31%
Chelsea	24%	44%	32%
Huddersfield	26%	46%	27%
Wolverhampton	27%	48%	24%
Manchester Utd	27%	46%	27%
Southampton	27%	46%	28%
Tottenham	27%	45%	28%
Everton	27%	44%	30%
West Ham	28%	47%	25%
Leicester	28%	46%	27%
Watford	28%	45%	27%
Cardiff	28%	44%	28%
Fulham	29%	47%	24%
Arsenal	29%	45%	27%
Burnley	29%	45%	27%
Brighton	30%	45%	23%
Newcastle Utd	30%	47%	24%
Crystal Palace	30%	45%	25%
Bournemouth	31%	44%	26%

Team	6 y Box	18 y Box	Outside
Burnley	16%	54%	30%
Arsenal	10%	57%	33%
Cardiff	10%	50%	40%
Manchester City	9%	57%	35%
Liverpool	9%	56%	34%
West Ham	9%	54%	37%
Brighton	9%	53%	39%
Tottenham	9%	52%	39%
Wolverhampton	8%	54%	38%
Manchester Utd	8%	51%	41%
Everton	7%	61%	33%
Bournemouth	7%	58%	34%
Leicester	7%	51%	42%
Southampton	7%	49%	43%
Watford	6%	58%	35%
Chelsea	6%	57%	38%
Crystal Palace	6%	57%	37%
Newcastle Utd	6%	54%	40%
Fulham	6%	48%	46%
Huddersfield	4%	53%	42%

Looking at the action zones time percentage and the finishing zone, the relevance of set plays for low ranked teams is confirmed.

- Brighton (54,28% of goals from set pieces) spent only the 23% of playing time inside the final third and 62% of shot came from inside the opposition box.
- Cardiff (42% of the goals from set pieces) spent only the 28% of playing time inside the final third and the 60% of shots came from the inside the opposition box.
- Huddersfield (47,61 % of the only 21 goals from set pieces) spent only the 27% of playing time inside the final third. Only 4% of shots came from inside the 6 y box (57% inside the 18 y box).
- Fulham performance was poor from set plays point of view; indeed, they finished their season with the highest percentage (46%) of the last six for shots from outside the box, confirming the open play tendency to find the opposition's net.

Manchester City spent the 35% of playing time inside the final third (81% between middle and final third); Liverpool's performances ensured the Reds the 35% of playing time inside the final third and the 78% between the middle and the final third. Shooting zones of the top 2 are very similar:

Team	6 y Box	18 y Box	Outside
Manchester City	9%	57%	35%
Liverpool	9%	56%	34%

2019/2020 (28 played games) tactical trends (opposition's own goals are excluded):

Team	Open Play	Counter Attack	Set Piece	Penalties	Total	% from set pieces	Table Rank
Newcastle United	12	1	12	0	25	48,00	13
Bournemouth	12	2	13	1	28	46,43	18
Brighton	17	1	9	1	28	32,14	15
Aston Villa	21	1	10	1	33	30,30	19
Burnley	20	2	9	2	33	27,27	10
Southampton	23	2	9	1	35	25,71	14
Everton	23	3	9	0	35	25,71	12
West Ham	22	1	9	3	35	25,71	16
Wolverhampton	22	4	10	3	39	25,64	6
Arsenal	27	2	9	2	40	22,50	9
Crystal Palace	15	1	5	3	24	20,83	11
Chelsea	34	4	9	4	51	17,65	4
Liverpool	40	8	11	5	64	17,19	1
Tottenham	30	5	7	3	45	15,56	8
Sheffield United	20	2	4	1	27	14,81	7
Manchester United	26	5	6	6	43	13,95	5
Manchester City	53	3	9	3	68	13,24	2
Leicester	37	7	7	5	56	12,50	3
Norwich	19	0	3	2	24	12,50	20
Watford	19	2	2	4	27	7,41	17
Total			162		760	21,32	

Let's now have a look to this current season before Corona Virus break:

- The first team that would be safe this season (Watford) hasn't relevant percentages of scored goals from set-pieces; indeed, as we are going to realize, it is one the best scoring team from outside the box, in terms of percentages.
- The first team to be relegated (Bournemouth) has scored the the 50% of the goals from set pieces.
- The second relegated team at the moment (Aston Villa) has scored the 33 % of goals from set pieces.
- The last team of the table (Norwich) hasn't relevant percentages of scored goals from set pieces, and as the first team to be saved, the percentages of scored goals from outside the box is quite high (38%).

Comparing these teams with the 2 first ones of the table, Liverpool has scored the 25% of goals from set-pieces (6% less than last season for now). Manchester City (25 points behind the Reds with 1 more game to play) percentage of scored goals from set pieces is 17,64% this season and it is on the same line of the past one.

2019/2020 (28 played games) action and shot zones:

Team	Fst. T.	Mdl T.	FnL. T.
Manchester City	21%	43%	36%
Liverpool	23%	44%	33%
Chelsea	25%	45%	30%
Southampton	26%	45%	29%
Sheffield United	26%	43%	31%
Burnley	26%	45%	29%
Everton	27%	43%	30%
Manchester Utd	27%	43%	30%
Leicester	28%	44%	28%
Watford	28%	45%	28%
Wolverhampton	28%	47%	26%
West Ham	28%	46%	27%
Tottenham	29%	46%	26%
Brighton	29%	44%	28%
Crystal Palace	31%	43%	27%
Arsenal	32%	42%	26%
Newcastle Utd	32%	45%	22%
Bournemouth	32%	43%	26%
Aston Villa	33%	41%	26%
Norwich	35%	42%	23%

Team	6 y Box	18 y Box	Outside
Burnley	16%	50%	33%
Everton	11%	57%	32%
Southampton	11%	49%	40%
Manchester City	10%	57%	32%
Wolverhampton	10%	56%	35%
Brighton	10%	51%	39%
Sheffield United	9%	64%	27%
West Ham	9%	61%	30%
Crystal Palace	9%	58%	33%
Liverpool	8%	62%	29%
Arsenal	8%	61%	31%
Leicester	8%	55%	36%
Chelsea	7%	58%	35%
Bournemouth	7%	57%	36%
Aston Villa	7%	56%	37%
Norwich	7%	55%	38%
Tottenham	7%	54%	39%
Manchester Utd	6%	47%	47%
Watford	5%	59%	35%
Newcastle Utd	4%	53%	43%

Looking at the action zones time percentage and the finishing zone, set plays relevance for low ranked teams is again confirmed.

- Watford that hasn't relevant percentages of scored goals from set pieces has spent the 28% of the playing time inside the opposition final third, the highest percentage among the bottom 6 and it has the second lowest percentage for shots from the 6 y box.
- Bournemouth (50% of the goals from set pieces) has spent only the 26% of playing time inside the final third and the 64% of shots came from the inside the opposition box.
- Aston Villa (33 % of the goals from set pieces) spent only the 26% of playing time inside the final third and the 64% of shots came from the inside the opposition box Norwich.
- Norwich has the second highest percentage of shots from outside the box of the bottom six and it has spent the 23% of playing time only inside the final third (the lowest percentage of the league).

Liverpool has spent the 33% of playing time inside the final third (77% between middle and final third). Manchester City, as second team in the league, has spent the 36% of playing time inside the final third (79% between middle and final third). Shooting zone of the top 2 are bit different this season: Liverpool is more "box oriented" than last season and Manchester City has 3% of shots less from outside the box, comparing the 35% of the previous season.

Team	6 y Box	18 y Box	Outside
Liverpool	8%	62%	29%
Manchester City	10%	57%	32%

Set plays analysis book set organization

How free kicks are divided and analyzed (book 1 and 2):



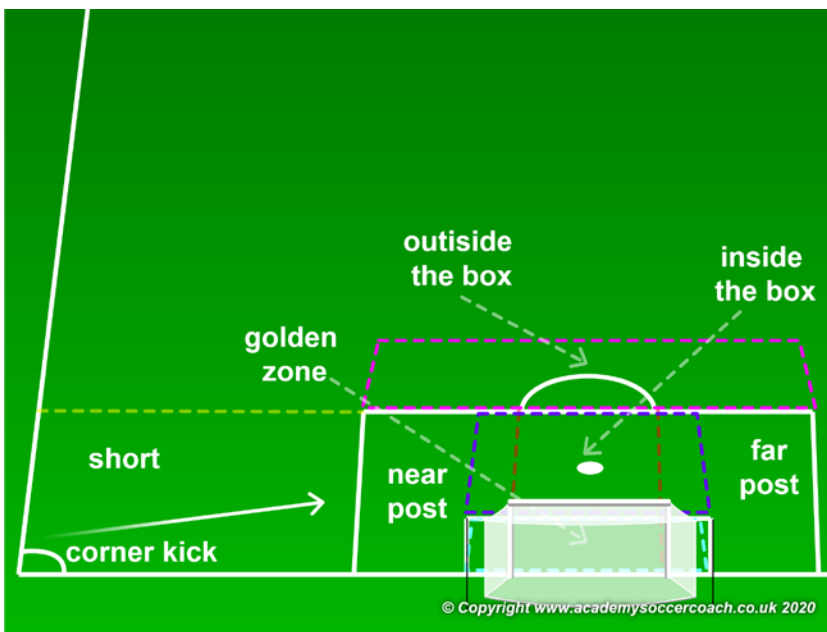
Book 1:

- Long distance free kicks
- Free kicks far away in the center (or through the center)
- Throw-ins
- Goals after winning the second times of the ball

Book 2:

- Lateral free kicks (from the first, middle and final thirds)
- Free kicks near in the center

How the corner kicks are divided and analyzed (book 3):



Book 3:

- Short
- Near post
- Far post
- Inside the box (18 y)
- Inside the box (6 y)
- Outside the box
- Goals after winning the second times of the ball

- **Long distance free kicks**

From the goalkeeper

Despite Guaridola and Klopp styles of play that are made of possession, passing patterns to build up from the back and pressure to win the ball back quickly after its loss (just to sum-up in few words), long balls from the goalkeepers are yet a weapon to position the team high up in the field and play the inside the middle and the final third. 5 goalkeepers are ranked in the first 10 positions for long passing accuracy without a proper connection with the table rank of the teams they play for:

Name	Rank	Long passes accuracy %	Team / Table Rank
Rui Patrício	1st	80,52	Wolverhampton / 6th
M. Dúbravka	4th	75,76	Newcastle United / 13th
Pepe Reina	7th	73,33	Aston Villa / 19th
Kepa Arrizabalaga	8th	73,29	Chelsea / 4th
Ł. Fabiański	9th	73,20	West Ham United / 16th

In this first example, West Ham United goalkeeper kicks a long ball from the first third, forcing the opposition to stand deep inside the defensive half of the field.



The back 4 line is very narrow in the attacking right side of the field, inviting the opposition defensive shape toward their left side of the field.

This way a weak side, along the defensive right side is created.

The goalkeeper kicks the ball toward that area of the field where the opposition is forced to defend 1 v 1, as the opposite one has been overloaded.

Three West Ham forwards are standing in the weak side (1 v 1 duels).



The opposition center backs and the fullback along the weak side are marking them, but the target player is able to header the ball forward, creating a space behind the direct marker, and a 2 v 2 duel is created in the final third of the attacking team.



The center back of the opposition tracks the run off the ball of the striker and the offside trap can't be used to nullify the duel.

A quick one touch combination is enough to open a path toward the goal for the second forward, who can receive and control the ball with the defender at his back.

The striker can face 1 v 1 the opposition goalkeeper,



And he shoots scoring a goal



- **Free kicks far away in the center (or through the center)**

Wolverhampton has just gained a free kick out wide along the attacking left flank, but the only passing option is a back pass, as three opposition players are standing between the ball line and the first forward passing option. Long ball along the flank or toward the final third may be risky and cause a loss of possession.



Wolves' center midfielder has time and space to receive in the center, as the nearest opponent is too far away to counter him while controlling the ball.



This way, he can receive, turn and open the play, playing through the center space of the middle third.

The opposition back line is forced to shift across the center and spaces among the players are opened and the attacking team may exploit them.



The left-center back has tracked Wolves' striker, and the fullback has shifted across the center to close the space. The teammate has been beaten in the previous 1 v 1 duel; a gap that may be to play through and toward the goal appears along the back four line.



The ball carrier can cut the defenders off and play onto the space and a wide teammate along the right attacking flank is free to receive without markers.

Wolf's striker receives, but he can't face the goal after the first touch, as the second opposition's center back has reduced the space.



The right winger can receive free and dribble the ball forward inside the opposition 18 y box and very close to the 6 y box.



All the defenders are looking at the ball and at the 1 v 1 duel and the second Wolves' striker can run off the ball between the opposition's right center back and fullback.

The goalkeeper is closing down the goal space on the near post, preventing the ball carrier from shooting, but there is space between him and the defenders that becomes an available passing path for the ball carrier to exploit.

Wolves' striker can score easily with one touch neat the goal line.



Long pass into the box after in-swinging / out-swinging type of free kick

This free kick is interesting to understand how the opposition defensive line can be broken turning to an out-swinging kick from an in-swinging kick with just a pass.



Watford's defensive line and furthermore the markers near the edge line of the box have shaped and oriented their bodies and positions to face an in-swinging kick from the middle third.



Meanwhile the opponent with the ball feints a long kick, and, on the other side, he passes to the teammate beside him, Watford's defensive line moves to cover a deep aerial ball, retreating toward the goal to defend.

The opponent receives free form markers, as 9 Watford's players were previously standing along the edge of the penalty box.



The defensive line is now broken; the defenders who were marking before has to move out to try to counter the ball carrier, the others who were covering the box are forced to retreat and to try to find a proper position to mark the opposition's forward.



Marking the strikers on the goal side is now difficult as there's no time enough to find the right position and the opposition's forward can control the ball, as the only Watford's defender who can contest the ball jumps out of time and he doesn't header the ball.

Watford's goalkeeper moves out of the goal line, but the striker can finish before anyone can counter him.



This sequence is interesting to understand the psychological pressure on the defenders when players are ready to face a type of free kick and the attacking strategy changes with just one pass.



From attacking point of view, we can find all the three main factors we analyzed in the first chapter of this book;

- **Strategy:** turn from in-swinging free kick to an out-swinging kick
- **Technical and tactical factors:** the short pass receiver decides when and where to kick the ball into the box and the scorer perform an individual difficult technical gesture to shot on goal.
- **Psychological factors:** the defending team is forced to change shape suddenly and they break the shape inside the box.

Direct long passes in the box

Confirming how long passes are part of the English Premier League, if we overview the first 10 positions of this specific rank, it is possible to notice that the table rank is not directly connected with long passes and their accuracy; top and bottom teams use them to develop the possession phase.

PL table rank	Team	Total	Per 90'	% accurate
1	Liverpool	1717	55.29	55.7
10	Burnley	1609	51.41	49.5
7	Sheffield United	1586	52.85	51.8
6	Wolverhampton	1582	50.38	61.9
14	Southampton	1512	48.2	50.1
15	Brighton H.A.	1489	47.84	56.7
4	Chelsea	1417	45.29	59.1
17	Watford	1415	45.05	55.8
8	Tottenham Hotspur	1394	44.18	49.9
12	Everton	1359	43.19	57.8

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Burnley is the second team with the highest number of long balls played (total amount and per 90') this season and it is the 10th team for accuracy; but this next sequence shows the best way the squad use to try to score due to technical lacks.



The indirect free kick inside the half cycle is played toward the opposition 18 y box and all the players, but the center one, who is momentary off side, move toward the goal keeping a regular position.



The first receive can header the ball toward the teammate in the center, anticipating the direct marker.

The defender tracks the center opposition's forward and marks him on the goal side; Burnley's player is now in a regular position and he has space to play. The marker is late and the goalkeeper is standing along the goal line.

Burnley's striker shoots on goal with one touch,



And he scores on the first post, anticipating the marker and the goalkeeper movement.



Quick long pass behind the opposition defense line.

This next sequence is interesting because a free kick becomes a counter-attacking move that the opposition tried to block with a foul, thanks to the quickness and vision of play of the kicker.

The opposition's foul had the intention to stop Leicester's counter-attacking move after having the possession back inside the defensive half of the field.



The player with the ball is on the ground with the ball in his hands and the opposition is unbalanced with only 2 players inside the defensive half.



Leicester's player kicks the ball quickly toward the left flank as he realizes that a potential 2 v 2 (+ opposition goalkeeper) can take the team to shot on goal with few passes.

Leicester's forward is free to run forward to meet the ball along the left flank and the only thing the defenders can do is to retreat back to cover the space.



The defender near the ball carrier is too late to tackle him.

The second defender can't cover the space inside the box and there is clear passing path from the ball carrier in the left attacking side toward the teammate in the center.



One player of the attacking team is trying to support the move from the back and a third defender is trying to retreat back, but they are both too far away from the ball to be active players.

The goalkeeper chooses to stand along the goal line rather than moving out to try to close or reduce the space inside the box and to make the goal's space smaller for the opponent in the center.

The passing path can be exploited and the goalkeeper is too late to save the near post and not properly positioned to change direction and to save the far post.



The defender's tackle is late and Leicester's forward can score to the near post.



- **Throw-ins**

Long throw-in along the flank and support action along the opposition weak side.

This sequence is an example of how to invite the opposition pressure toward the ball area and to exploit the momentary unsuitability of the off side rule from throw-ins.



Three Chelsea's players are positioned close to the point of the throw-in along the attacking right side of the middle third, as they should receive a short throw-in and combine quickly between them.



Otherwise, the center forward shifts wide along the flank and he receives a long throw-in, forcing the opposition back line to retreat back quickly.

The nearest teammate of Chelsea's forward receive the flank play,



And he cuts 2 defenders out near the 18 y upper corner.



The opposition defense is unbalanced along the left side and there is space along the defensive right side for Chelsea to finish.

The right center back and fullback don't shift properly, as the center back doesn't face the ball carrier in the center, but the fullback does it; this way he can't shift wide toward the right to counter the opponent who is running forward off the ball along the weak side.



Chelsea left fullback can meet the ball without pressure and shot on goal.



He scores on the far post with a crossed ground shot.



Invite the opposition pressure, switch the side and finish after a through ball

Everton can throw a ball in deep along the attacking right flank and the area around the point where the play is going to be resumed is condensed with 4 more players; all them are man-marked and the opposition places a fifth player to cover the passing path toward the center.



A short passing combination is the only solution to avoid possession loss and prevent the team from losing yards in the field due to a back throw-in. The nearest teammate of the thrower drops back along the flank but he receives under back pressure of the direct opponent.



The receiver creates a space with a one touch ball control with the outside step; the marker doesn't counter him properly and a second opponent is too late to double-team him.

The ball carrier can turn and attempt a through pass; 7 opponents are positioned around the ball, creating a strong side and a general 7 v 5 situation with numerical advantage (4 v 2 very near the ball.); despite the chance to put strong pressure around the ball for the opposition, Everton can combine exploiting the passive defensive action of the opposition.



The only defender who presses actively is the one who counters the second receiver after the throw-in pass, forcing him to receive and control the ball backward and preventing him from combining 1-2 with the teammate, who is trying to play a give and go pattern of play and to run off the ball behind the opposition defensive line.



Everton has placed the team shape high up in the field and the support play from the back is useful to direct the attacking move out of the condensed throw-in area.

The ball carrier passes back to the support teammate before the defenders can counter him, preventing a loss of possession.



Everton midfielder receives and he switches the side toward the opposition's weak side (left attacking area of the final third.)



In this situation, the opposition is very quick shifting across the first third to cover the weak side y (right defending area of the first third) and the back four line is shaped properly along the edge line.

Everton left fullback has shift across the center to provide a short and quick passing option and he can receive free from markers.

He can control and turn facing the opposition's goal, but he could only play out wide apparently, as the opposition has shape 3 narrow defensive lines (4-2-3).



The run of the ball of the Everton's player in between the lines becomes crucial, as he invites the opposition right fullback out wide and opens a gap between him and the right center back along the edge line of the 18 y box. The pressing opponents don't close the clear forward passing path as they don't press the ball carrier; the first one decides to cover the outer passing lane and the second one is too late to prevent the ball carrier from performing his action.



Everton's left fullback can pass toward the striker, who is very clever to find the position and to prevent the defender from anticipating him. Indeed, the striker places his body goal side and the defender can't cover the goal space; the pass can be direct toward the goal allowing the striker to receive the ball facing the goalkeeper.

The only action the defender can do is to try a sliding interception, but he is anyway positioned along the wrong side of the opponent and the attempt is late to prevent the striker from receiving.



Everton's player can receive and face the goal just out of the 6 y box; the second opposition's center back attempts a tackle to prevent him from shooting, leaving the direct opponent, but he is late too. How this previous pass has cut out the defensive shape is very clear, as 3 Everton's players may finish in front of the goal (2 of them totally free) against only one defender and a second one, who is late back to the 3 attackers.



The striker can control and shot with a 2 touches plays, beating the defenders in timing,

And the goalkeeper to the far post.



Short passing combination to free the teammates in between the lines

Sheffield United left wingback feints a long throw-in along the flank to invite the opposition's defensive line deep first.



Otherwise, he plays a short throw-in with the left midfielder, who invites the pressure of another opponent, opening a space at his back and big enough to dribble through.



The left wingback receive the return pass and he has space to dribble through; furthermore, the strikers are position in between the opposition midfielders' and defenders' lines.



The opposition midfielders' face the ball carrier and the strikers are free to move at their back and in between the lines.



A 3 v 2 duel is clear behind the midfielders against the opposition right center back and fullback; there is also a pocket of space that can be exploited between those two players.

Indeed, one of them receives and dribbles inside the box from the attacking left flank and the other can run off the ball toward the goal free from markers. The opposition defender along the weak side is late to counter the center forward.



He can move in between the defenders off the ball and shot with one touch.



Sheffield's forward scores shooting to the far post of the goal.



Quick short combination to play a cross pass and to finish exploiting the deep position of the defensive line.



Newcastle players combine with a short throw-in that is received by one player along the end line because of the unsuitability of the off side rule; the opposition defensive line is standing deep along the 6 y box upper line.



The receiver passes the ball back with one touch, nullifying the pressure attempt of the opponents.

The player, who has thrown the ball in, plays an immediate cross pass inside the box, anticipating the defenders' pressure attempts again.



The opposition defense is now placed inside the 6 y box in front of the goal and all the defenders are looking at the ball's trajectory and they leave an opponent free in the center.



The 2 v 1 aerial duel is won by a Newcastle's player who headers the ball back in the middle of the 18 y box.

The goalkeeper decided to save the goal, rather than moving out to try to catch the ball.

The free player in the middle of the 18 y box is free to try to finish with a volley shot, and the defenders can only try to cover the goal space.



He scores at the right of the opposition goalkeeper, exploiting the chance to finish free from markers.



In this sequence, the strategy to exploit the absence of the off side rule to force the opposition defensive line very deep and the support play of the player who finishes in the middle of the box, exploiting the freedom from markers are the main factors that leads Newcastle to score.

Force the opposition defense deep to exploit zone 14

This next sequence is similar to the previous one, but the attacking team exploit zone 14 to finish.

The West Ham player who throws the ball in exploits the space at the back of the pressing opponents.



The receiver invites a fourth opponent out of the box dribbling the ball away from the box.



He then cut them all off with a through pass between two players; the third advanced one can't be active, as he is too far away from the ball.



West Ham's Num.11 invites the opposition's defensive line ever deeper playing a 1 v 1 duel and dribbling the ball toward the end line.



The defender doesn't close him properly and he can turn toward the field.

West Ham's forward attack the defensive line in front of the goal,



And 5 players are covering the space inside the box, but they create a gap in the middle and just out of the box (zone 14).



West Ham midfielder is free to support the move and receive free from markers inside zone 14.



He then can shot with a two touches action on the right side of the goalkeeper.



- **Goals after winning the second times of the ball**

Throw-in in the final third and pressure in zone 14

Liverpool can throw a ball in along the attacking left flank in the final third; 3 players invite the opponents out of position creating a strong side around the ball and a 4 v 4 duel is created, as well as a gap between the ball area and the rest of the defenders.



Liverpool's left fullback tries to throw the ball onto the gap where a teammate runs toward off the ball to exploit that space.



The opposition is quick in condensing the ball zone, creating a 3 v 1 duel and kicking the ball away.

The center midfielder supports the attacking situation from the back and he can win the ball back inside zone 14 on the edge of the 18 y box and he can header the ball to forward in the center of the penalty area. The opposition has a huge numerical advantage (7+gk v 3 inside the box).



Despite the numerical superiority and the 2+ v 1 advantage against the striker, the opponents allow him to receive and they leave him the space for a quick combination with the second forward. One defender forces the striker backward, but the second one leaves the space for a pass, leaving a clear path toward the second striker. Furthermore, the potential receiver is not marked properly, as the defender is late and leaves a gap inside the box between him and the striker.



There could be also a potential space to exploit along the attacking left side of the box, where the right fullback is running onto and who could receive on the run free from markers.

Liverpool's forwards combine quickly and the receiver's direct marker tries an interception rather than tracking him and forcing him out of the goal space, but he is out of time; this way, he opens the goal space and view to the opponent.



Despite the general 7+gk v 4 numerical advantage of the defenders against the attackers, the defensive shape is unbalanced as the defenders are out of time, moreover against the player who is going to shoot on goal; the last defender in along the 6 y line is trying to retreat toward the second post to save the goal.



The combination's speed prevents the goalkeeper from being properly positioned with his body, both to save a shot to the near post and the far post; he can only properly stand on the first post.

Indeed, the striker can shoot to the second post and score despite the defender's interception attempt near along the goal's line.



Ball possession recovery deep along the flank and finishing through support play from the back

Newcastle plays an in-swinging free kicks around the upper corner of the opposition penalty box; the opposition defensive line starts from the wall's line ready to cover the goals space.



Newcastle strategy is clearly to carry out a flank play from the far post to attack the opposition 6 y box; this is a recurrent tactical solution to play indirect free kicks inside the final third. The center striker is usually the target player who plays the ball back inside the opposition center box.



The defensive line is properly positioned on the near post, but two Newcastle's players could be free to header on the second post without opponents between them and the goal (they are not off side, as they are standing on the same line of the teammate who is attempting the header on the second post). The defender can anticipate Newcastle's striker and he headers the ball out wide.

Newcastle striker recovers the ball quickly and he decides to play a cross pass back inside the box rather than facing a 1 v 1 duel against the same defender.



All the attacking players are properly marked from the goal side (2 v 1 on the near post and 3 v 3 on the far post).



2 Newcastle players are free to move toward the ball. The first one is standing in the center of the opposition's box, and he could try to win again another attacking second time of the ball; the second one is moving inside the opposition's box from the back and his marker loses the position (he is not positioned at the goal side), leaving him free to move toward the ball with space to get a running start before heading the ball.

The timing on the ball of the support player allows him to header higher of his direct marker; the previous marker can be active because of his position at the back of Newcastle's attacker.



The opposition goalkeeper decided to save the goal rather than moving out of the goal space. Newcastle's player can jump higher than the defender and header the ball toward the goal.



He scores to the near post without any chance of save for the goalkeeper.

Ball recovery out of the box and cross pass behind the defenders' line

Crystal Palace plays an out-swinging free kick from the attacking left top corner of the opposition box 18 y box. The opposition defensive line starts from the wall's line ready to cover the goals space. 2 Crystal Palace's attackers seem to be free to header in the center, as the defenders lose the marking position while moving backward.



The goal space is anyway well covered and the opposition defender headers the ball away from the 6 y box; the defenders are in cleaning the box taking into consideration to general duel in front of the goal (7+gk v 6) which is not totally safe situation in terms of numerical advantage.



3 players of the defending team (West Ham) are ready to win the defensive second time of the ball along the edge of the penalty box.

The box is cleared but the ball goes toward the opposite side where a Crystal Palace supporting player can win it on the top corner of the box; despite this, a safe and quite high defensive is shaped to save the goal. The nearest passing option for the ball carrier is marked and he would under pressure and forced out wide in case of reception.



The ball carrier is very good at exploiting the passive countering action of the defender, he saves the ball with his body and he cuts the defender off with a double scissor feint that allows him to change direction and turn toward the box.



The mistake of the defender is clearly not to force the ball carrier out wide staying too far away from the opponent.

Crystal Palace's ball carrier can find enough space from the defenders to play a cross pass inside the box with an in-swinging kick toward the space between the defensive line and the goalkeeper.



The opposition's goalkeeper decides to save the goal, standing along the goal line, even if the type of cross could have helped him to block the ball running out of the goal.



The defenders don't cover the space between them and the goalkeeper and 2 Crystal Palace's players can attack and header the ball free from marking; meanwhile the goalkeeper is saving the first post of the goal; a third attacker can stand on the far post free from marker too, as the opposition's defensive shape is totally unbalanced and all defenders are looking at the ball.

Despite the numerical advantage around the ball, before the flank play header, the defenders are not properly positioned, as they are still running toward the goal when Chrystal Palace's players header the ball toward the goal space and when the third attacker can receive the header on the far post just inside the 6 y box.



The goalkeeper decides to save the goal line again, not moving out nor to catch the cross pass, neither to try to block the flank header pass. The receiver can score easily free from markers.



Ball recovery after condensing the ball area and playing behind the opposition's pressure area

Wolverhampton must put the ball back in play with a throw-in along attacking right side in the middle third and a strong side around the is created to combine quickly and get out of the pressure zone.



The opposition overloads the quarter of the field with 8 players looking for numerical advantage and trying to prevent the Wolverhampton from playing forward. 3 Wolves' players near the ball are man-marked, but the fourth one loses the timing of marking action and leaves an attacker free to receive in front of the thrower. 3 defenders are placed out of the closest area to the ball to provide cover and to check the further passing option.



The nearest passing option receives and he passes the ball back, moving the opposition's defensive block. The 8th player of the defending team (Chelsea) move quickly toward the receiver of the back pass to press him while controlling the ball.

Due to this pressure, the receiver is forced to play quickly an unsafe pass to maintain the possession along the flank.



The teammate receives, but now all the Wolves' players are under pressure and they are forced to play one touch passing combination to prevent the opponents from tackling and winning the ball back.



All them are man-marked in 1 v 1 duel but one, who can receive but without enough time to choose the best option to play forward or overcome the pressure.

The opposition left fullback can perform a sliding tackle, intercepting the ball.



Thanks to the condensed area that Wolves preventively created around the ball to counter-press the opposition in case of loss of possession, the ball can be recovered quickly.



Furthermore, because of the defensive action of the opposition's fullback, there is space to exploit along the attacking right flank, and the opposition is closing down the passing path toward the center.

The ball carrier has a pocket of space to play the ball and enough time to play a safe pass to keep the possession despite the pressurized area.

He dribbles the ball up and he passes it out wide; the mistake of the defender in front of him is to try to press the ball carrier rather than closing the passing path along the flank to the next receiver; his movement allows the next ball carrier receiving and turning toward the direction of the deep pass along the flank.



As the receiver and new ball carrier passes the ball along the flank, all defenders retreat to cover the depth, but the goal side defenders in relation to the Wolves' player.



He moves off the ball behind the direct marker to receive are late, and they can't prevent him nor do his blind run both the consequent ball reception and control.

He receives along the lateral side of the opposition box with space and time to play a cross inside the box.



Wolves' forwards are positioned between 2 opposition defenders on the near post and free from marking on the far post.



The one on the near post can header the ball, free from a real marking as both the defenders cover the space toward the goal rather than countering him.

He scores heading the ball toward the far post of the goal.



Summary

Set plays mean attention, awareness (**psychological challenge**), **strategy**, technical and tactical ideas, reaction speed (the ball is momentarily out of play, but it will be sooner or later.); they often make the fortune of a team's season, trigger important actions that unlock matches or facilitate goal scoring, and they can be vital factors to define the difference between saving the squad or relegation, qualification for international tournaments or mid-table positioning.

Set plays are different games, time to time, in the match; they are a crucial factor for all the soccer matches all over the world, at any level of players' quality (amateur or professional). English Premier League is not an exception; in fact, set plays and long passes have been always a landmark of the English way of thinking about soccer, and it is the same nowadays, despite coaches like Pep Guardiola, Mauricio Pochettino, Jurgen Klopp and many others, who see soccer as possession, ground and quick passing pattern of play and pressure. We may say that these coaches have developed their ideas, following the basis of the English soccer.

If set pieces and long ball are crucial for top teams in England, it is even truer for low ranked teams at a professional level, as they represent chances to get near the opposition's penalty area and to score a goal, despite the possible and expectable technical lacks of these kind of teams; the differences between low and high level teams decrease in these tactical situations, as the strategy and the psychological moment can make the weaker team stronger than the opposition.

If we would like to sum up some dogma about set-pieces, these statements could fix some staples:

- A team is more likely to score from set-pieces compared to normal play possession.
- From free-kicks, teams are more likely to score by shooting directly, rather than crossing the ball; on the other side, the data of the last season in England do not confirm the tendency and demonstrate the essentiality of developing tactical solutions to make set plays efficient weapons.
- In corners, a goal is more likely to occur from a shot from the second-ball rather than a shot directly
- Success for the top-ranked team is usually associated with the dominance in transition moments. Higher ranked teams demonstrate control of set pieces and established offence, whereas lower ranked teams usually demonstrate poor performance in all moments of the game except established defense.
- A set-piece specialist is more valuable to mid-to-low level teams, compared to high-level teams.

This book is the first one of a set of 3 that analyze the set plays in Premier League over the last two seasons and that include footages from the 2019/2020 to understand how crucial they are both if the attacking team can score directly from a set piece, and if a team create suitable conditions to finish after a set piece; from this point of view, the attacking or defensive second times of the ball become another essential factor to fully understand set plays.

The analysis in this first volume include:

- Long distance free kicks
- Free kicks far away in the center (or through the center)
- Throw-ins
- Goals after winning the second times of the ball

They are included all together, despite they seem to be different kinds of set plays, because all these situations of play require pattern and combinations to finish and they are the proof of how set pieces are crucial to create scoring chances even when direct shots are not possible.