

SCORING GOALS FROM SET PLAYS

Creative Set Plays of English Premier League Teams



VOLUME 2

by Luca Bertolini



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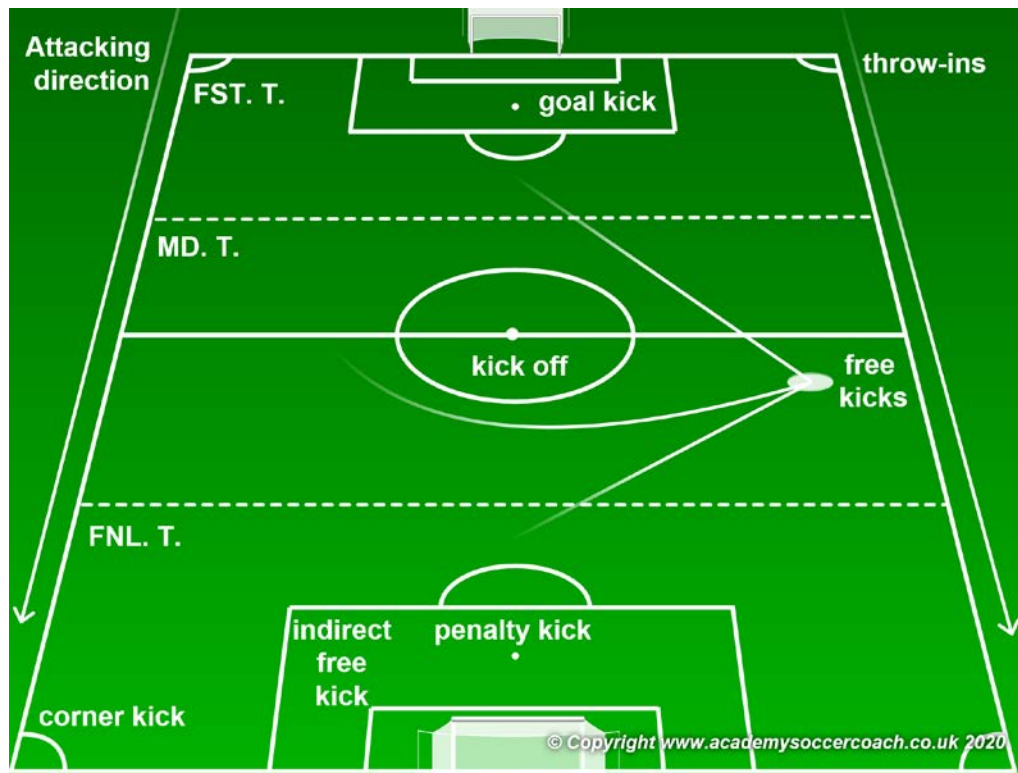
Introduction

Following the study of Yang-Qing Zhao & Hui Zhang “Analysis of goals in the English Premier League”, who divided the 20 teams in 4 groups of 5 and who identified 8 types of possible goals to score (elaborate attacks, counter-attacks, from direct free kicks, from indirect free kicks, from throw-in, from corner kick, penalty and own goal), top five teams have a significant advantage in open play goals (elaborate attack and counter attack) compared to the other teams. However, this overwhelming advantage is weaker in the other four types of goals (direct free-kick, corner, penalty, and own goal) and even absent in goals from indirect free-kicks and throw-ins. At the same time, there is no significant difference between the lower-middle 5 teams and the bottom 5 teams, which could be explained by the pattern of play of successful teams being more stable than that of unsuccessful teams.

Goals are rather unlikely events in elite football; the so called dead ball actions (DBA), which are situations where the game is resumed following an interruption (throwing in the ball from the sidelines, kicking it back into play through corner kicks, penalties, direct and indirect free kicks, (kick-offs and goal kicks) are a potentially effective way of generating more scoring opportunities.

Which are the possible set plays after DBA?

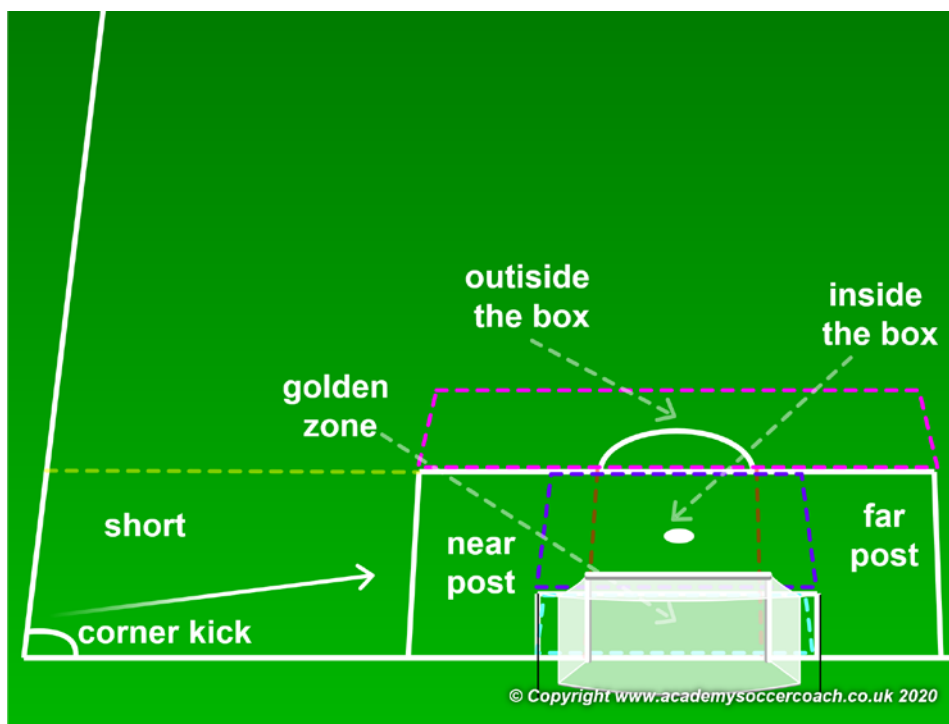
- Kick off = the game starts (1st half / 2nd half).
- Goal kicks = put the ball back in play after being out of the end lines.
- **Throw-ins (along the first, middle and final thirds)** = put the ball back in play from the side lines.



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



- **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.



- **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.

The difference in performance between teams has decreased over the years as a result of the continuous professionalization of football (Frydenberg, 2011; Perea, 2008); one of the main problems with football is the difficulty in generating scoring opportunities because of its low effectiveness compared to other sports considering the number offensive actions and scored goals (Castelo, 1994). The increased intensity of play and the high concentration of players in specific areas of the field near the ball are variables which prevent many goals being scored (Wallace and Norton, 2013).

On the other side, 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.

These following ideas are commonly recognized as the main factors of the set plays effects on a team:

- 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 corner (4.8% chance of scoring from 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.)

The decisive moment in football, as opposed to other sports like basketball or handball with high scores, is really unpredictable since a victory can be achieved with one single shot on target at any time during a game (Marques, 1995). Several studies support the contention that the majority of goals are scored late in each half, probably on account of fatigue, both physical (Bangsbo, 1994; Krustup et al.,

2006) and mental (Smith et al., 2016), which accumulates as a match proceeds and leads to a greater number of technical failures (Russell, Benton, & Kingsley, 2011). Fatigue has a direct link to poor decision making and has been linked to a decrease in sprinting speed, therefore affecting the ability of players to backtrack and deal with all situations effectively (Catteeuw, Gilis, Wagemans, & Helsen, 2010; Krstrup, Mohr, & Bangsbo, 2002; Reilly, 1997).

(**Source** - Analysis of goals in the English Premier League – 2019, by Yang-Qing Zhao & Hui Zhang)

Roxburgh & Turner (2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011) analyzed various goals scored in four different editions of the UEFA Champions League between the years 2007 and 2011 and showed that nearly 6% of goals were scored from indirect free kicks.

Njororai (2013) analyzed the goals scored during the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa and his results indicate that 28.57% of the goals originated from indirect free kicks. 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), and according to Maneiro (2014) 5 indirect free kicks are needed in order to achieve a shot on target, 11 for a shot between the two posts and the crossbar and 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, despite generally only the 3,1% of all the indirect free kicks result with a goal.

The same data are confirmed looking at the indirect free kicks (No. 447) during the 64 games of the World Cup in South Africa (2010): the results indicate a low efficiency in the shots between the three posts and goal, but the 64.3 % of goals that came from indirect free kick contributed to score points in the final result.

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).

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%)

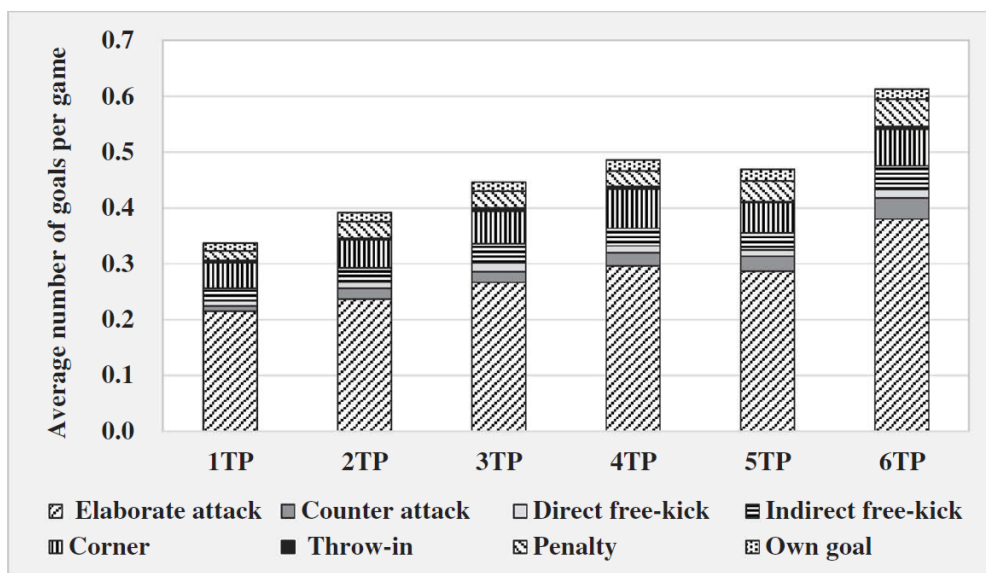
Analyzing 2,303 corner kicks (2015/2016 English Premier League season), top 6 teams favored out swinging deliveries with dynamic attacking organization during ball deliveries, whilst the bottom 6 teams favored in swinging deliveries and mixed static and dynamic attacking strategies in equal measure. 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.)

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.

Physical and mental fatigues are also the consequences of the finishing poorness of the attacking phases: for every 100 attacking attempts (possession phases), less 10 result in shots on target and only 1 in goal (Dufour 1993). Just one of every 50 attacking actions (with last key pass attempt) end with a goal (Garganta and Pinto, 1995). The psychological pressure on defenders during set plays moments of the game has to be included factors that lead a team to score and the other one to concede a goal.

(The following picture shows the average of different goal types in Premier League. **Source** - Analysis of goals in the English Premier League – 2019, by Yang-Qing Zhao & Hui Zhang)



It is apparent

Figure 1. The average of different goal types in each six 15-minute interval per game.

that the scores increase as the matches progressed, especially in the last 15 minutes. However, it is interesting that the average number of goals scored from elaborate attacks per match is 0.380 in time period 6, much higher than the number per match scored in time period 1 (0.215). A similar situation occurs with respect to corner kicks, indicating that as the game progresses, the number of goals scored using different methods increase.

Considering all the previous data, it becomes evident that also the scored goals from elaborate attacks are consequences of a previous set piece that was not efficient after a first attempt, but that was the starting moment of a successful attacking move. The reasons of a scored goal, especially during last 15' of each half (and furthermore of the second half) are strategic (attacking team), technical and tactical (attacking and defending teams) and psychological (attacking and defending teams).

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

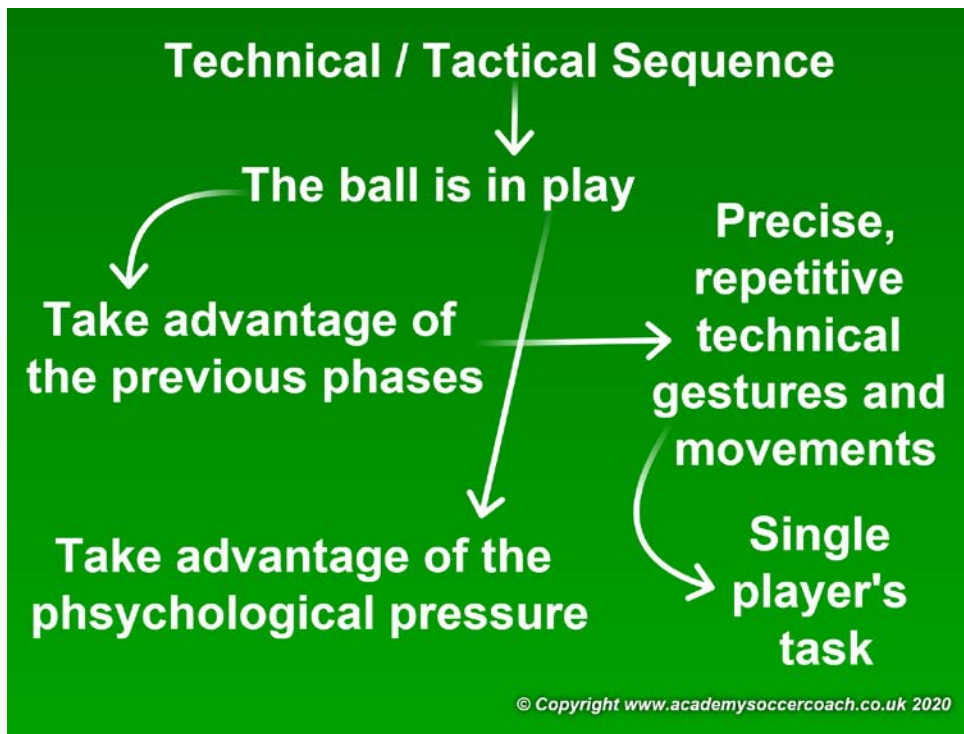
- **Strategy:** from the break of the phase of play to the moment when the player is going to kick or throw the ball in.
- **Tactics:** it is the moment before the ball is played.
- **Technical / Tactical Sequence:** as the ball is in play and the attacking team should take advantage of the two previous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



To defend becomes harder and harder during the matches and to manage all the psychological factors under physical and mental fatigues is the even harder. To realize offensive tactical ideas is then easier.



If the tactical choices are not correct, even the technical gestures won't be proper to solve the issues of the situation of play; this mistakes influences set plays like all the other aspects of the game.



4 specific variables play “key” roles in the effectiveness of indirect free kicks, and at the same time, these are the factors and causes of ineffectiveness:

- The delivery of the ball (power and space of delivery).
- The path of the ball (ground or aerial).
- The number of attackers/defenders on the ball.
- The offensive/defensive organizations.

Indirect free kick must be taken with the right power and ball path, and at the same time the players in the shooting must provide synchronized movements with the correct timing between the kicker and the teammates off the ball, accurate ball path and a precise delivery of the ball to areas where the opponents (goalkeeper and defenders) cannot prevent the goal

When the attacking team takes an indirect free kick, the advantages they have regard the high contextual certainty about the actions happening shortly before the free kick is initiated, which allow the attacking players to carry out movements planned beforehand in order to destabilize defensive maneuvers and achieve a better shooting position. Another possible advantage of the attacking team is the fact that they control the time when the game is kicked off again, which gives them a stable and static advantage as the opponents must remain at a certain range. This gives the attacking team a time advantage they do not have in the dynamic play (Castelo, 1999; Faria & Tavares, 1996; Maneiro, 2014). Saraiva (2007) points out the importance of surprising the opponent in order to achieve a shot on target.

Deciding the time of the new kick off, whereas Pérez and Vicente (1996) highlight “the effectiveness in terms of goals of this type of actions when they are carried rapidly because they are 4 times more successful than the slowly performed ones”; but this is not always true, as a wrong quick free kick, with the attacking team that is pushing up to take the established positions in the field, may give the opposition a counter-attack chance in case of ball recovery.

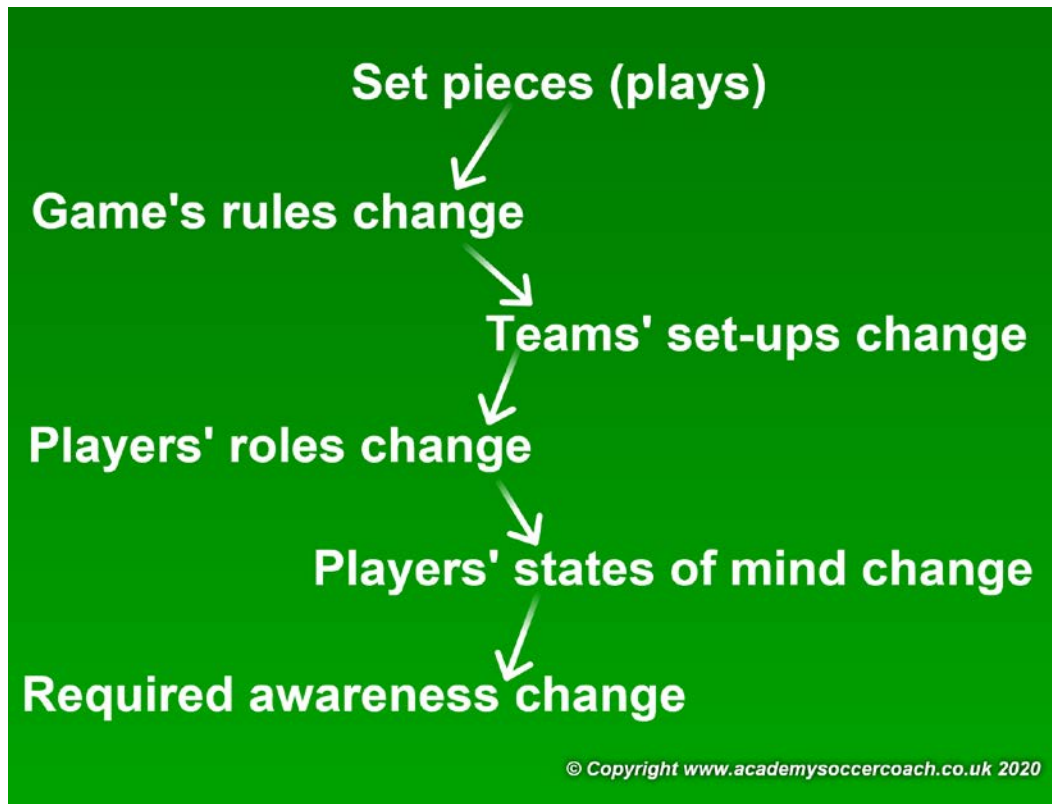
(Adapted from - Indirect free kicks in professional football. Identification of explanatory variables, June 2018. By López-García, Maneiro-Dios, Ardá-Suárez, Rial-Boubeta, Losada-López, J.L.4 and Casal-Sanjurjo).

The number of attackers and defenders, despite being one of the factors that shape the free kick (and set play) situation of play, don’t seem to be the real focus point, as defenders are often supposed to have the numerical advantage against the attackers; from this point of view, the quality and the skills of the players are linked with the offensive and the defensive organizations.

As we have just found out, the attacking organization have an advantage against the defensive organization in terms of time; on the other side, defensive shape should have an advantage in terms of space protection at the beginning. Through dynamic organization of the attacking phase, the team that is trying to score must try to nullify and to beat this advantage and overcome this lack through the quality of the players and of the established movements.

When a static attacking organization allows a player to finish from a free kick, positioning mistakes of the defenders are always the main reason of a conceded goal.

Where all these defensive difficulties come from? Let's have a look to the factors that shape a set plays situation:



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 worth 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.

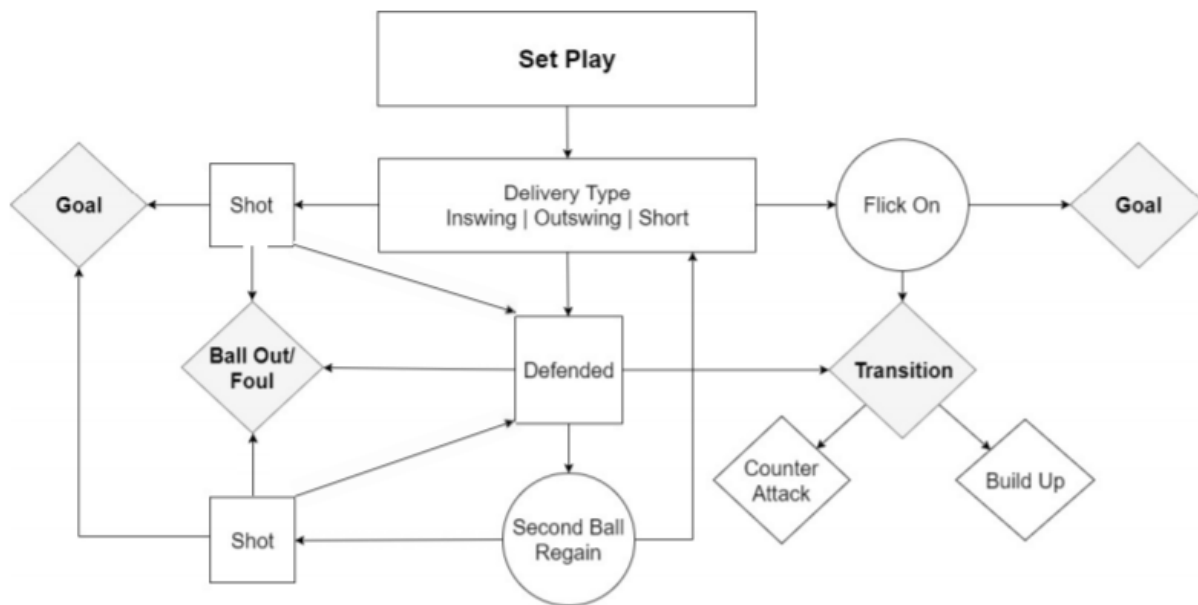
- Awareness to opponents' and ball's positions.
- Awareness and understand where the opponent are moving to and how the set-piece is kicked.
- Feelings of danger and risk (defenders).
- Feelings of a crucial chance to score.

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.

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.**

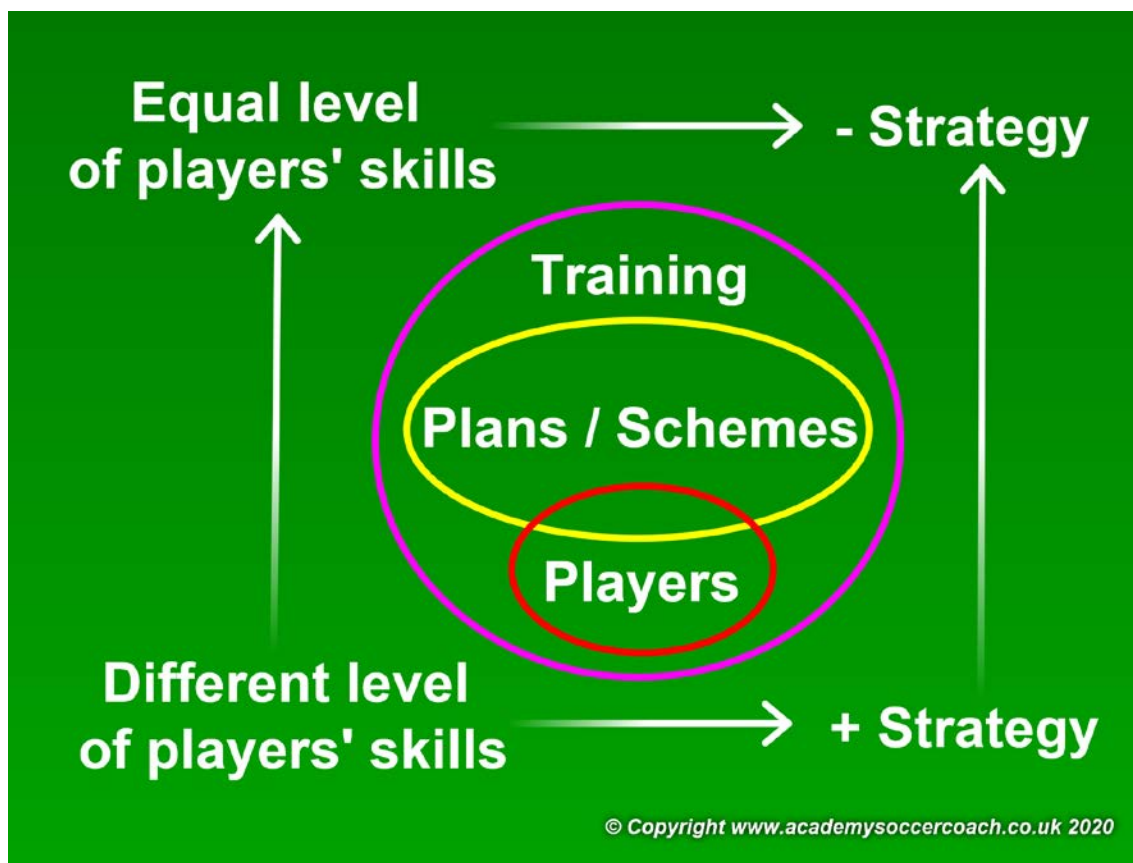


When set-pieces are played with aerial passes or kicks, headers often lead to ball losses (especially after goal kicks and throw-ins); a substantial amount of headers are performed to prevent spatial progress of opponents when employing direct attacks with long passes. From this point of view, second times of the ball (offensive and defensive transition phases) become crucial and they lead to score a goal or to face counter-attacks because of opposition's unbalanced shapes.

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.

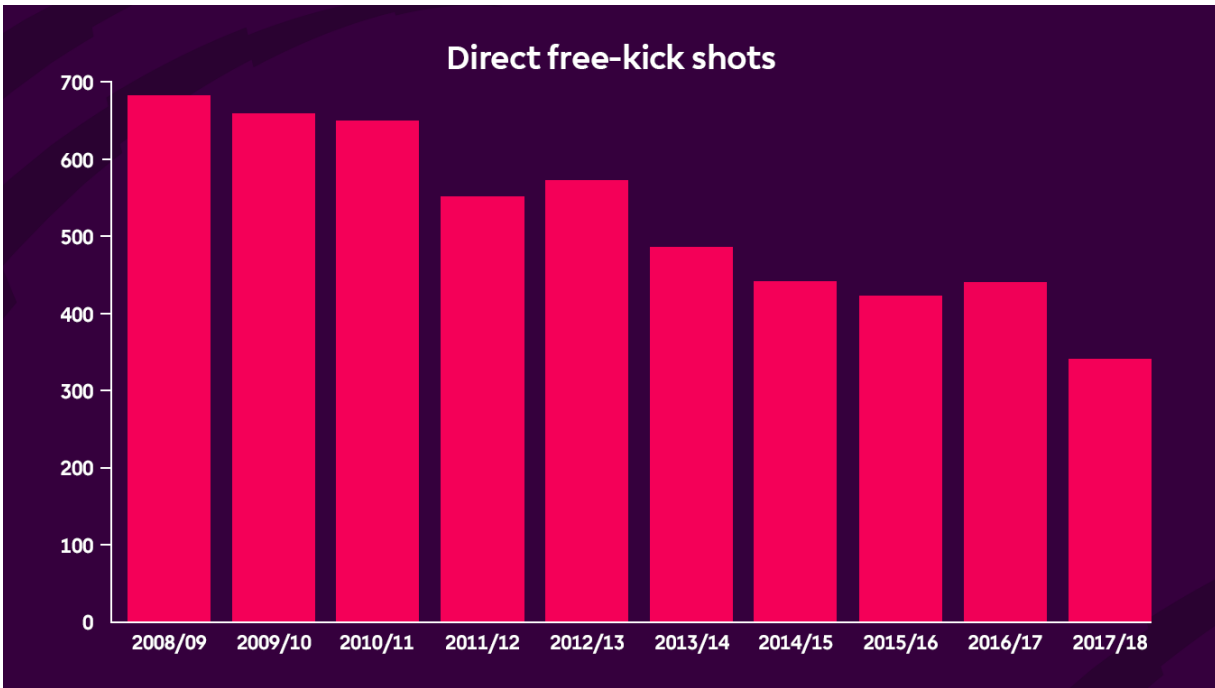
Whatever is the defensive system, the players, their individual skills and technical abilities become more crucial than team's strategical organization over the time of the match:



As we are going to analyze through this book, many goals have been conceded due to wrong positioning and wrong technical choices of the defenders and thanks to proper and quick technical/tactical behaviors of the attacking players.

Free Kicks in English Premier League

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).



Only 16 direct free-kicks were scored that 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

This current season is not an exception:

Rank	Player	Team	Direct free kicks goals	Role in the field
1	R. Mahrez	Manchester City	2	RWF, RAMF, RW
2	H. Wilson	AFC Bournemouth	2	RW, RAMF
3	C. Eriksen	Tottenham Hotspur	1	RW, LW, AMF
	J. Shelvey	Newcastle United	1	LCMF, DMF, RCMF
	C. Hourihane	Aston Villa	1	LCMF, LDMF
	J. Ward-Prowse	Southampton	1	RCMF, LCMF, RW
	P. Aubameyang	Arsenal	1	CF, LAMF
	João Moutinho	Wolverhampton	1	LCMF
	P. van Aanholt	Crystal Palace	1	LB
	A. Cresswell	West Ham United	1	LB, LCB
	J. Maddison	Leicester City	1	LCMF, AMF, LW
	P. Groß	Brighton & H.A.	1	AMF, RW
	L. Dunk	Brighton & H.A.	1	LCB, CB
	R. Fraser	AFC Bournemouth	1	LW, RW
	T. Alexander-Arnold	Liverpool	1	RB
Total scored goals			17	

In an average match each team takes 3 indirect free kicks aimed at scoring a goal (between 7 and 12 total indirect free kicks all over the field); in total, 2.9% of these kicks ended in a goal (as we have already found out, almost 36 indirect free kicks are needed to score a goal), just the 21.8% ends in a shot and the 9.3% ends in a shot between the posts. Although the indirect free kicks seems to be usually ineffective, those that ends in a goal tend to be decisive, as the 64% contribute in some manner to the final result of the match (**Source** - Effectiveness of Indirect Free Kicks in Elite Soccer, 2014 by Claudio A. Casal, Rubén Maneiro, Toni Ardá, José L Losada and Antonio Rial).

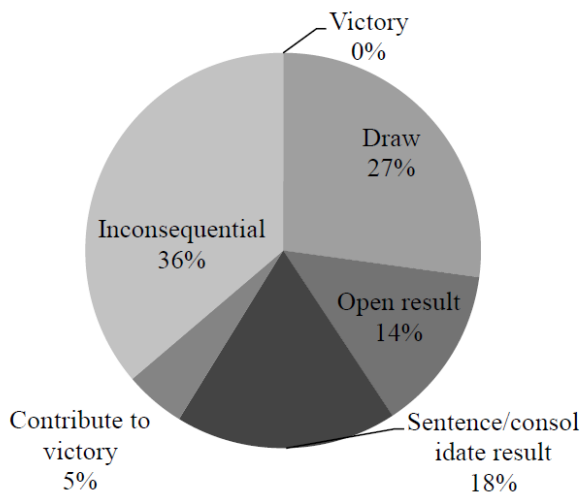


Figure 3. Significance of the indirect free kicks in the final result of the match.

Effectiveness does not depend on the position or laterality of the free kick, the score at the moment of the kick, the type of defense, or the shooting area. Apart from few situations of play we are going to analyze through this books (center indirect free kicks close to the opposition box), indirect free kicks are usually more effective when the ball is passed to another player before it reaches the shooting area (short pass) than when it is not passed through the air, when two or three attackers touch the ball, and when the offensive organization is dynamic or it forced to be dynamic because of the previous possession team touches and combinations. (**Source** - Effectiveness of Indirect Free Kicks in Elite Soccer, 2014 by Claudio A. Casal, Rubén Maneiro, Toni Ardá, José L Losada and Antonio Rial). On the other side, set plays and indirect free kicks are always a crucial weapon for EPL, whatever is the table's rank:

Rank	Player	Team	Number of assists	Assists from set-pieces	Assists from free kicks	Role in the field
1	K. De Bruyne	Manchester City	15	1	0	RCMF, AMF
2	T. A.-Arnold	Liverpool	12	6	1	RB
3	R. Mahrez	Manchester City	7	1	0	RWF, RAMF, RW
	Adama Traoré	Wolverhampton	7	1 (after ball reception)		RWF, RWB, RW
	Roberto Firmino	Liverpool	7	0	0	CF, AMF
	A. Robertson	Liverpool	7	1 (after ball reception)		LB
4	David Silva	Manchester City	6	0	0	LCMF, AMF
	João Moutinho	Wolverhampton	6	4 (2 after passing combination from corner kicks and throw-ins)	1	LCMF
	R. Jiménez	Wolverhampton	6	0	0	CF
	H. Barnes	Leicester City	6	0	0	LW, LWF
	S. Mané	Liverpool	6	0	0	LWF, RWF, LAMF
	N. Pépé	Arsenal	5	1	0	RAMF, CF, RW
5	R. Snodgrass	West Ham United	5	4 (+1 after passing combination from corner kick)	2	RW, LCMF
	A. Westwood	Burnley	5	3	0	RCMF
	J. Maddison	Leicester City	5	3	0	LCMF, AMF, LW
	J. Grealish	Aston Villa	4	1	0	LWF, LW, LCMF
	A. Carroll	Newcastle United	4	0	2 (flank play from indirect free kicks)	CF
	Willian	Chelsea	4	1	0	RWF, RAMF, LWF
	M. Mount	Chelsea	4	4	2	AMF, LCMF

2018/2019 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	18
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	17
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	18
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	17
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%

Team	6 y Box	18 y Box	Outside
Burnley	16%	50%	33%
Everton	11%	57%	32%
Southampton	11%	49%	40%

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%

How Premier League carry out their passing pattern of play:

Team	Short Passes pg	Through Balls pg	Long Balls pg	Cross pg
Manchester City	629	3	51	26
Sheffield United	324	1	76	24
Liverpool	562	2	65	24
Everton	353	2	64	23
Chelsea	551	2	55	22
Aston Villa	324	1	62	21
Burnley	259	1	72	20
Wolverhampton	368	1	66	20
Leicester	466	2	54	20
Arsenal	459	2	54	20
Southampton	331	1	66	19
West Ham	341	1	64	19
Brighton	461	1	61	19
Man Utd	458	2	49	18
Watford	322	0	63	17
Bournemouth	347	1	57	17
Tottenham	447	2	54	17
Newcastle Utd	272	0	61	16
Crystal Palace	328	1	59	15
Norwich	411	1	58	13

- Analyzing the percentages of this table, it is clear how direct play is yet common in English Premier League, despite top six teams have made possession style a landmark.
- Top six squads have high percentages of short passes and nearly a half (Manchester City) or 1/3 (Liverpool and Leicester, for instance) of long ball are used as for cross passes.
- Bottom six teams have some of the lowest numbers of short passes and the highest number of long passes and these data are linked to low percentages of crosses; this mean that long balls are an essential factor of their style of play. For this kind of teams long balls are a tool to advance in the field, to arrive in the final third and to create scoring chances.
- In the lateral free kicks from the first third section of this book, we will try to have a complete overview of how these teams try to play attacking soccer thanks to long free kicks from goalkeeper or defenders toward the attacking teammate inside the final third or along the border line between the middle and the final thirds.

Set plays analysis

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



- Free kicks near in the center
- Lateral free kicks
 - From the first third
 - In the middle third
 - In the final third

The situations of play of the next pages seems to be a counter-trend in relation to the introduction and the data of the Premier League tendency; but the aim of the book is to analyze the peculiar indirect free kick that lead to a goal with few touches.

This book aims to look into the developments of so rare events as successful indirect free kicks are, taking into consideration that when they lead to a goal, they become so decisive and that by my side, 4 or 5 touches of the ball before a shot on goal should be considered as play by play situations rather than set plays situations.

- **Free kicks near in the center** (When an indirect free kick is taken under optimal conditions, the percentage of shots at goal can increase fourfold (from 21.8% to 85%), while that of goals can increase 15-fold (from 2.8% to 43%). (**Source** - Effectiveness of Indirect Free Kicks in Elite Soccer, 2014 by Claudio A. Casal, Rubén Maneiro, Toni Ardá, José L Losada and Antonio Rial).

Feinting a direct free kick

Chrystal Palace center midfielder Milivojevic is on the ball and he is going to take a direct free kick just outside the opposition's penalty area.

The opposition's (Southampton) goalkeeper has positioned the wall to cover the near post (4 players) and 2 more are ready to mark the attackers near it.

A 4 v 3 duel is created in the center of the 18 y box along the edge line; all Palace's players are ready to attack the goal space.

The last defender is standing just out of the penalty box to counters rebounds and second times of the ball.



The kicker feints a direct shot to the near post with his right foot...

...But he plays a cross pass in the box where the teammates can exploit the numerical advantage; one attacker can anticipate the direct marker just out of the 6 y box and the goalkeeper can only try to save the header as he can't move out of the goal line due to the previous feint that forced him to position himself to save a direct shot.



The attacker, who headers the ball, scores to the near post and Crystal Palace takes the lead.



The direct shot feint have invited 6 opponents toward the ball against only one kicker and 2 more attackers; this positioning have created a numerical superiority for the attacking team along the edge line of the penalty box that the possession team could exploit after the cross pass.

With feint around the ball

Aston Villa can take an indirect free kick just out of the opposition penalty box and 2 players could shot with the right or left foot; the opposition's (Newcastle) goalkeeper has positioned a 3 men wall inside the 18 y box and 3 more defenders are marking 2 opponents and the third one is ready to counter the shooting attempt. 2 more defenders are standing in the center of the box along the same wall's line.



The right footed player turns around the ball to be positioned in front of the left footed kicker to provide the support for a quick 2 touches combination before shooting.



His positioning allows to change the shooting point and to create a path toward the near post of the goal; furthermore, the opposition wall is broken

After the quick 1-2 the kicker can shoot on goal sideward the opposition's wall; as it has been broken, the goalkeeper can't see the ball while the opponent is shooting (despite his starting position along the goal's line was correct at the beginning) and he is now out of time and too late to attempt a save.



Aston Villa then scores a goal thanks to a shot to the first pole that the opposition goalkeeper can't save due to the first 2 touches combination that changed the shooting point and the broken wall in front of him.



In this situation the roles of the attackers in front of the wall has been crucial and strategic like the combination at the beginning, as they have been able to prevent the goalkeeper and the opponent ready to counter the kicker from realizing who was going to shot the free kick.

Free the goalkeeper side

3 Liverpool's players (Salah near the ball, Milner to shot with the right foot and T.A. Arnold behind them) are ready to take a direct free kick just out of the opposition's (Chelsea) penalty area. Chelsea's goalkeeper has positioned a multiple men' wall in front of him that is supposed to cover the majority of goal's space to the kicker. 2 more Liverpool's players are standing in front of the opposition wall, trying to prevent the goalkeeper from looking at the quick planned free kick combination



Salah moves toward the ball and he passes it back with the foot's sole and the third player (T.A. Arnold) moves toward the ball to shoot; the goal space is much bigger for a shot taken from a more center point than for a direct shot on goal of the right footed player (Milner).



Chelsea's wall has been now broken and both the opposition's goal posts could be suitable directions to direct the shot and score.



The goalkeeper is yet standing along the goal line with a “waiting” body shape while the opponent is shooting as he can't see the ball position due to the condensed area in front of him.



For these reasons he concedes a goal to his first post at his left, as Liverpool's kicker could shot quite as many of the oppositions' players were standing along the wall without a real chance of pressure.

In this situation, a direct free kick has been turned into an indirect free kick thanks to a feint and a quick backward touch.

- Lateral free kicks

Team	Short Passes pg	Through Ball pg	Long Balls pg	Cross pg	% Long Balls / Crosses
Sheffield United	324	1	76	24	31,58
Burnley	259	1	72	20	27,78
Wolverhampton	368	1	66	20	30,30
Southampton	331	1	66	19	28,79
Liverpool	562	2	65	24	36,92
Everton	353	2	64	23	35,94
West Ham	341	1	64	19	29,69
Watford	322	0	63	17	26,98
Aston Villa	324	1	62	21	33,87
Brighton	461	1	61	19	31,15
Newcastle United	272	0	61	16	26,23
Crystal Palace	328	1	59	15	25,42
Norwich	411	1	58	13	22,41
Bournemouth	347	1	57	17	29,82
Chelsea	551	2	55	22	40,00
Leicester	466	2	54	20	37,04
Arsenal	459	2	54	20	37,04
Tottenham	447	2	54	17	31,48
Manchester City	629	3	51	26	50,98
Manchester United	458	2	49	18	36,73

Team	Total aerial duels pg	Won	Lost
Burnley	49.9	25.6	24.4
Sheffield United	48.8	25	23.8
Everton	46.1	22.9	23.2
Southampton	45.6	21.6	24
West Ham	44.7	22.5	22.2
Crystal Palace	43.1	21.6	21.6
Bournemouth	42.8	20.9	21.9
Watford	41.6	20.9	20.7
Newcastle United	41.1	20.4	20.7
Wolverhampton	38.8	20.3	18.4
Aston Villa	38.3	18.8	19.5
Chelsea	37.2	18.7	18.5
Brighton	35.5	19.5	16
Tottenham	34.8	17.2	17.6
Liverpool	34	17.9	16.1
Leicester	33.8	16.9	16.9
Norwich	31.7	14.4	17.2
Manchester United	30.4	15.5	14.9
Arsenal	29.8	13.4	16.3
Manchester City	28	14	14

All Premier League bottom 6 teams, but Brighton & H.A. and Norwich, have a high percentage of long ball played and a quite low (not the lowest) percentage of crosses; this means that long balls are often used to reach the final third (or to play along the flanks) both when the ball is in play and when they have free kicks chances.

The teams at the top of this specific table have also the highest number of aerial duels and of the aerial duels won, as well.

The bottom 6 of the league's table percentages are close to 50% won and 50% lost, as they use long balls to contest the opposition and create scoring chances. Free kicks are not an exception.

- **Lateral free kicks from the first third**

Long pass to allow the team to stand high up the field and close the passing lanes to the opposition inside the attacking half of the field

As we have already found out, bottom 6 teams (but 2) are included among the squads that use long passes much more than all the others in EPL; or, the bottom 6 use long passes to cover fill technical gaps and to position the shape higher up in the field, more than other teams that use long passes as part of an established and tactical possession phase. In this sequence, Aston Villa's goalkeeper Reina takes a lateral indirect free kick inside the first third.



The real aim of the possession team is not to attack the opposition's deep spaces, as the target player along the defensive line is fighting for the ball alone, but to place the team higher on the field.



3 Aston Villa advanced midfielder could receive a potential lay off pass or header, but the opposition's numerical advantage around the ball is very clear (6 v 4).

The opposition goalkeeper can take the ball easily after the backward header of the defender and Leicester spreads out the field to start the possession phase from the back.



On the other side, Aston Villa can stay high in the field, forcing the, as instance, the opposition left fullback to play backward and 3 center midfielder can stand along the half line to cover the center passing paths.



The long pass of the goalkeeper allowed the team to shape 2 lines of three under the ball line but also high up the field, preventing the opponents from playing out from the back with few touches. If the target player were able to win the aerial duel, the teams could have been able to keep the possession thanks to three advanced player behind him, to be balanced at the back and far from the goal to defend.

Long pass to attack the depth and to win the second time of the ball

An interesting and recurrent tactical solution by West Ham United for free kicks with long balls is to create an overload area in the field to invite the opposition in that specific area and to isolate few more players in another zone to let them play 1 v 1 duels or duels with limited numerical advantage for defenders.



In this situation the goalkeeper is taking a wide free kick in the first third, and West Ham has preventively positioned 6 players around the half cycle, inviting 5 opponents high up the field.



The goalkeeper plays the ball over this condensed area toward the opposition defensive line that is can be considered a weaker zone, as there is a clear 3 v 3 duel around the ball. Even the opposition's holding midfielder is cut off and the target player can header the ball forward in the space where a teammate is moving toward off the ball.

In this situation, the opposition's center back is able to rebound the ball, anticipating West Ham forward.



As the opponents have been forced to stand in a strong area before kicking the ball into play, the defenders are alone and the midfielders are late in retreating third positions.



To win the second times of the ball when the opposition clearances are not effective becomes easier as in this example; one of West Ham's forward in the opposition weak area can control the ball and try a cross pass in behind the defenders line and toward the space between the defensive line and the goalkeeper.

West Ham players who created the condensed area usually move up in the field to provide support and to organize the defensive shape high.

The opposition's defender (the right fullback who shifted across) is again isolated in a 1 v 1 duel in front of the goal.



Long pass to attack the depth along the opposition's weak side and to finish with blind runs behind the defenders

In this second example, West Ham creates a strong area along the right side of the middle third shaping a 4 – 3 formation and inviting the opponents toward the left defensive side of the field.



The goalkeeper kicks the ball toward the attacking left side of the middle third from the right side of the first third.



The opposition defenders are again isolated in 1 v 1 duels and West Ham forwards have time and space to play when the ball's touch of the target player is effective and he can header or pass the ball to a teammate.

The second forward receives and faces the opposition's goal after a blind run around the defender. The third one starts to attack the goal behind the direct marker.



All the opponents who were invited toward the strong and condensed area of the field are now late to support the defenders, as they are too far away and due to the West Ham playing combination quickness. Once the forwards can combine together, the passing pattern of play are always very quick to attack the opposition's deep spaces as soon as possible.



The ball carrier can touch the away from the direct marker and the last defender makes a wrong and decisive first step toward the ball rather than covering the depth as the ball carrier turns with the ball; this way West Ham center forward can run off the ball toward the goal behind him, creating a path for an assist pass.

West Ham center forward can receive and dribble the ball forward with the defender behind him and facing the goalkeeper...



...beating him in time while he is moving out of the goal to try to counter the shooting attempt.



Long pass from the flank toward the center final third to condense the opposition and free the wide area of the final third to combine through

A similar principle of play to the one by West Ham we just analyzed is adopted by Wolverhampton, even if the basic idea is to combine quickly and to create passing patterns of play, rather than attacking the depth directly.

Wolves' center back plays an indirect free kick along the right side of the first third (close to the middle third) and he drives the ball toward the center forward (target player) who is standing along the opposition defensive line.



Both the target player can header the ball, and the defenders clear the it, the attacking midfielder support the teammate, receiving the lay-off pass or fighting to win the second time of the ball; in this situation the opposition defender (Manchester United) clears the ball...



...but Wolves' right midfielder who has shifted across anticipate the holding midfielder and wins the ball high up in the field. He headers the ball at his left toward an available space where 2 teammates can receive without immediate pressure.



The left attacking midfielder has the possession and he can face 1 v 1 the direct opponent; the center offensive midfielder moves off the ball and he attacks the available space on the right and the right midfielder support the attacking move as well.



The center forward position makes the left center back and fullback busy as they have to check him; this way they can't shift toward the ball and get narrow to the other defender and they can't shape a proper line of two, leaving space along Wolves' attacking right flank.

The first movement attempt in behind the defensive line isn't effective as Man Utd's defenders are able to cover the opponent; the ball carrier than turn and drive the ball toward the opposite flank.



He passes to the sideward teammate preventing the opposition's midfielders from countering them both; indeed the receiver can control the ball (and turn with one touch of the ball) toward the flank freely even if was not properly positioned while the ball was travelling toward him.



Wolves right fullback is free to receive along the flank, as the opposition's defensive lines are very narrow in the center.

The basic aim of these indirect free kicks is very clear; to invite the opposition to get narrow in the center, to force them to free the flanks and use the fullback's support runs to progress the attacking moves.

The right fullback receives near the upper corner of the penalty box and he tries to combine with the right attacking midfielder, who moves off the ball at the back of the defender who is facing the ball carrier.



The right attacking midfielder receives and the fullback underlaps inside the opposition 18 y box; both them are closed and the ball carrier is forced to turn backward.



One of the center midfielder shifts wide to provide support and to keep the possession as much high in the field as possible.

A 3 v 3 duel is created along the attacking right flank; meanwhile, 3 players are standing just inside the opposition box to receive a cross pass (second 3 v 3 duel) and the second center midfielder provides support in the center, inviting another opponent to follow him out of position. Man. United's defenders are isolated inside the box.



The right attacking midfielder receives and he can play a cross pass inside the box.



Wolves pattern of play have now created a 4 v 4 duel inside the box with the only goalkeeper who ensures defensive numerical advantage.

Furthermore, there is available space near the opposition's near post due to the defender's position, who is not placed goal side but he retreating behind the opposition's forward.

Indeed, he can receive and try to finish near the opposition's goal near post, anticipating his direct marker and a second opponent who counters him.



Long pass and combination along the flank to free zone 14 and shot on goal

The next sequence is a Liverpool's recurrent way to carry out and develop free kicks with long balls along the flank, exploiting the speed of play and the quick passing combinations that characterize its style of play and the basic speed of its attacking players.

The goalkeeper Alisson plays a free kick along the left side of the first third and he passes an aerial ball along the flank.



The left forward (Chamberlain, in this sequence) is the target player of the pass and he receives along the left flank; the center forward Firmino and left midfielder Wijnaldum provide support in the center and backward.



3 opposition's center defenders must look for 2 forwards, shaping the last defensive line.

Chamberlain and Firmino combine 1 – 2 wide with volley one touch passes and the left forward receives on the run along the flank; this combination of play invite the third center defender out wide.

The right center back runs out wide to try to equalize the (2 v 1 duel along the flank) and he isolates the left center back and the left fullback against one of the speediest players of the whole Premier League (Salah).



Liverpool's left forward dribbles along the flank under the pressure of an opponent, and he can maintain the possession, taking the attacking move to a potential finishing phase.



The opposition center defenders retreat to cover the goal's space and 2 Reds' midfielders support the attacking move at the back.

When the ball carrier turns inside and tries to dribble the ball inside, the defender is not positioned correctly, as he is standing on the other side of the ball line and he creates a passing path toward the 18 y box.



Liverpool's left midfielder moves toward the box off the ball and he can receive inside the space at the back of the defenders who are out of position.



The opposition left fullback would be also involved in 1 v 1 duel in the weak area of the defensive shape if Salah received the ball.

The right inverted forward of the Reds shifts across inside zone 14 to be a passing or assist option for the teammates.

Liverpool's left midfielder receives and all the defenders are out of time to try to counter him; the only one in front of him can prevent a shooting attempt and close through passing path.



Salah becomes the best passing option, as he can receive without immediate pressure in zone 14 and he can try to shoot on goal.



West Ham's goalkeeper makes a great save, preventing Liverpool from scoring.



- **Lateral free kicks in the middle third**

During the analysis in the first part of this book, it has been proved that indirect free kicks usually take to a scoring chances if the ball is touches 3 or 4 times by different players to become really effective; simple crosses are usually without result for the attacking team. The following sequences don't aim to argue with what we found out from historical data and research, but the analysis of scored goals from free kicks and few touches of the ball want to underline how these kind of free kicks become really effective due to defensive mistakes rather than for forwards' real merits. On the other side flank plays are often crucial to make a few touches indirect free kicks decisive.

Long pass in the box and flank play (defensive mistake: the goalkeeper stands along the goal line)

Brighton & H.A. takes an indirect free kick on the right side of the middle third, and as we analyzed, these situations of play become chance to attack the opposition's first third; long balls are the natural consequences.



3 attacking players are standing along the opposition defensive line on the line of the near post, 3 on the far post, and another one try to provide a further passing option along the flank, but the passing path is clearly covered. The long ball is the best solution to try to finish.

The opposition (Southampton) defensive shape is made of 7 players close to the edge line of the penalty area (6 are man marking the opponents and the 7th is standing in the center without opponents and he could try to clear the ball directly.). Another defender is placed just few yards up to the defensive line to try to win the ball is the box is cleared.

As the player on the ball is going to kick it toward the box, all the defender start to move backward to cover the space inside the 18 y box.

One Brighton player can header the ball, jumping higher than the defenders and make his technical gesture a flank play for a teammate in the center, who moves off the ball toward the 6 y box. None of 3 defenders track him, but they just look at the ball.



In this sequence, the goalkeeper has the main responsibilities for the conceded goal; he could move out of the goal line to catch the ball after the first kick, taking advantage of the long time of the ball in the air and its low speed, and furthermore, he should have moved out of the goal line to anticipate the opponent before he could header the ball to the near post scoring a preventable goal for Southampton.



Through pass in behind the defenders (defensive mistake: slow reaction of the 2 first player of the defensive team who don't close the passing path)

Wolverhampton can take an indirect free kick on the right side of the middle third and the player on the ball feints to prepare an out-swinging long kick toward the opposition box. Zone 14 is condensed on the far post (7 v 5 duel with defensive numerical superiority). A kicker's teammate is providing wide support along the flank, but the wide passing path seems to be covered.



The defenders in front of the kicker and the wider one don't close a clear passing path toward the deep space in behind them and the nearest player to the ball allow the opponent to play freely standing too far away from the ball.



The wide attacker can try a blind run off the ball, as the direct opponent is only looking at the ball.

The defenders are cut off by the pass and none of them can attempt a sliding tackle to intercept it.



Wolves' wide player can receive inside the opposition box and exploit the space in front of the near goal's post; as the opposite area were condensed, the first goal's post become a weak zone of the defending team that can be exploited.



All defenders are late and they can't cover that space, as they tracking the opponents by they are out of time and from this side of the attacker; anyone can't cover the goal's near post area but the goalkeeper.

The attacking move is too quick to allow the goalkeeper to move out of the near post space...



...and Wolves' forward can score easily shooting to the far post of the goal with one touch, receiving the short cross pass from the teammate.



The weak zone on the near post of the goal (inside the box) is the result of the preventive strong area on the far post (inside zone 14) in relation to the free kick point and of the gap between the players along the defensive left flank; these players allowed the wide opponents to receive in behind them due to the a gap that created a clear passing path toward the box.

- **Lateral free kicks in the final third**

Lob pass to overcome the opposition line (defensive mistake: wrong body shape of the direct marker and slow reaction speed of the nearest defenders to the scorer)

Man Utd can take an indirect free kick on the left side of the final third and the player on the ball feints to prepare an in-swinging kick toward the opposition box. Zone 14 is condensed in the center (7 v 4 duel with defensive numerical superiority). 2 kicker's teammates are providing wide support along the flank and a further deep passing option, but they are involved in a positional 2 v 2+1 duel along the left flank. The kicker plays a lob pass for the teammate in front of him and the defender can't counter the opponent's movement as he is not placed on the goal's side; as the ball travels, he is already late.



All the other defenders are not reactive enough to shift across and to try to counter the shooting attempt of United's forward.



The forward can score with a one touch action (side volley shot) to the near post.



The scorer's marker was not properly positioned at the beginning of the move, standing on the opposite side from the goal space and having a slow reaction time in relation to the opponent. Therewith, all the other defenders didn't shift across to attempt a tackle against the forward and the goalkeeper didn't cover the near post and he didn't reduce the goal space moving out of the line while the forward was preparing the shooting action.

Through pass after quick play without opposition distance enquiry (defensive mistake: slow reaction speed of the defenders and low awareness level as the kicker don't asks the referee for opponents distance from the ball)

David Silva takes a quick free kicks without asking the referee the opponents' (Watford) distance from the ball's position...



...passing in between the three defenders in front of him and the receiver can move toward the ball in play thanks to the center player who isn't aligned with the teammates.



The defensive line is broken due to the uncomplete alignment that has been caused by the quick free kick.

The last defender can't cover the passing path between him and the goalkeeper, who is saving the near post.



Man City can score a goal with a receiver on the far post due to the whole opposition's defensive shape unbalanced shape and the slow reaction speed of the defenders.



The lack of awareness of the defenders who didn't place any player around the ball at the allowed distance and the uncomplete defensive shape at the moment of the ball's kick took Man City to score a goal with few touches, shooting inside the 6 y box.

This situation is a clear team's wrong defensive behavior; a typical moment of team's inattention that may occur in set plays situations during the matches.

With feint (defensive mistake: one defender is not on the same line of the teammates and allows the forward to start from the goal side in relation to their markers)

Arsenal can take an indirect free kick on the right side of the final third and two players on the ball may kick an in-swinging or an out-swinging balls; the first player feints to prepare an in-swinging kick toward the opposition box. Zone 14 is condensed in the center (7 v 6 duel with a poor defensive numerical superiority). 2 defenders are placed in front of the ball position. The highlighted forward starts moving off the ball while the teammate feints an in-swinging kick and he overcome a block attempt of a second defender..



This way, he invites the direct marker toward the goal and all the attackers can take their position along the goal side, as they are in play.



After the in-swinging kick feint, the second player kicks an out-swinging ball toward the box; the Arsenal's defender who is keeping all opponents in play runs back too late, and all the attackers can run toward the goal moving in front of the direct markers.



One of the Arsenal's defenders inside the box tries to clear the box, jumping higher than the direct opponent, but he is late too, and the ball trajectory can only go toward the goal, where 2 opponents are free from markers, as they started moving in front of them from the goal side.



Three Arsenal's defenders are only looking at the ball and they don't track and counter the forwards in front of the goal; furthermore the last header of their teammate in center of the 18 y box leaves them both in play.

None of the defenders can try to jump to counter the attackers who can header the ball to the opposition's goal...



...Scoring to the far post at the right of the goalkeeper.



The first defensive mistake is crucial for all the rest of the sequence; the first Arsenal's defenders who track the opponent while moving forward during the first in-swinging kick feint allow all the attackers to move from the goal's side, taking a decisive advantage against the direct markers. Moreover, a second defender could have blocked the opponent's run, but he did not place his body between him and the forward. The best tactical solution would have been to leave the forward free to move over the defensive line and leave him offside, keeping the only defensive line just out of the penalty box.

Out-swinging pass (defensive mistake: incorrect depth coverage and free running path toward the goal for the forwards)

West Ham can play an indirect free kick from the flank in the final third; the edge line of the 18 y box is very condensed; the defensive line is not properly shaped as none of the defenders are marking from the goal side and furthermore, they don't leave the forwards offside, as they are moving along their same line.



2 West Ham's forwards can clearly run off the ball toward the opposition goal and anticipate the markers on the near post.



The type of kick and the trajectory of the ball toward the first goal's post and inside the space between the last defender and the goalkeeper help the attacker to meet it with the right timing. The goalkeeper moves out of the goal too late to try to meet the ball before the opponent.

This way the opposition goalkeeper can't nor anticipate the opponent on the ball, neither tries to make a save attempts along the goal's line. West Ham's player on the ball scores with a one touch action, anticipating the goalkeeper while moving out.



The quick and 2 touches action of this indirect free kick has been made possible by the incorrect shape of the defensive team along the edge line of the box; the defenders did not marked the forward from the goal side and many of them were totally free from marking; the in-swinging trajectory helped the attacker to meet the ball and prevented the goalkeeper from moving out of the goal line and try to catch the ball

In-swinging pass (defensive mistake: loss of marking while tracking the opponent's movement toward the goal / passive defenders)



West Ham takes a free kick from the right side of the final third and players on the ball plays an in-swinging aerial cross pass toward the box overcoming the 1 opponent wall in front of him. 9 players of the opposition team (Leicester) start from the edge line of the penalty area in a 10 v 5 numerical advantage. All West Ham's forwards seem to be marked and without any chance to meet the ball before the opponents. The only potential issue in this moment could be the deeper starting line of the defensive shape in relation to the ball position.



The space inside the box seems to be covered and all West Ham's player marked; the only duel that the opposition loses is if the one against the attacker who headers the ball; the marker loses the attacker while moving to meet the ball and the defenders in front of him only look at the ball and they don't try to jump, standing passive as their direct opponents don't go on moving toward the ball. These 2 defenders

seem to prevent the teammate from running deeper and countering the attacker, who can anticipate all them jumping higher. The goalkeeper can't move out of the goal line due to the high number of players inside the box and to the ball's trajectory toward the penalty kick cycle and not toward the 6 y box, despite being an in-swinging kick. The technical gesture is crucial to score to the far post with a header.



Despite a huge numerical advantage in this situation (10 v 5) inside the box, there were two crucial defensive mistakes: the loss of marking while one defender was tracking the direct opponent's movement toward the goal and the passive action of 2 other defenders who don't try to jump or counter the opponent (at least physically) on the ball while meeting it in the air.

Drop pass into the opposition's box (defensive mistake: lost 1 v 1 duel due to physical and technical superiority of the forward against the defender)

This next sequence demonstrate that the player's skills become crucial in set plays when the team's quality has a similar level, as for instance Chelsea and Leicester (4th and 6th in EPL table) have this season. Chelsea can play a free kick from the left side of the final third and the player on the ball decides for a drop cross pass toward the box rather than for an in-swinging pass despite being right footed.



Only 2 Chelsea's player represent a danger in this situation and the zonal marking of Leicester's deeper line in front of the goal is well organized. 3 more Chelsea's attacker stand behind the ball line and they could be a rick for the defending team only due to short clearances and second times of the ball. A 1 v 1 duel on the ball in the air makes the difference here.



Chelsea's player who headers the ball takes a better time on the ball than the marker and he jumps higher than him, despite the defender's marking side seems to be correct, as well as his body position.

In addition, the technical gesture has a high quality level, as the header sends the ball to the far post and very close to the post/bar angle. Also in this situation the goalkeeper couldn't move out of the goal line due to the ball's trajectory toward the penalty kick area and not toward the 6 y box; despite being a drop cross pass the speed of the ball is good enough to force the goalkeeper to save the goal without enough time to move out and try to catch the ball in the air.



This Chelsea goal is representative of players' crucial roles in set plays; despite the strategy of the attacking team and the tactical developments of the moves, when these 2 factors cancel each other out (from attacking and defensive points of view), the skills and the quality of the players becomes essential. The scorer jumped higher and with a better timing compared to the direct marker, who should have countered the opponent .The zonal marking defensive organization of the defensive team (Leicester) was well shaped, but the better technical action of the scorer made the difference.

Flank play inside the box (defensive mistake: defenders only look at the ball trajectory and they don't man-mark the most dangerous opponent near the ball in front of the goal)

Newcastle takes a free kick along the penalty side of the attacking left flank; the player on the ball takes an out-swinging kick to send the ball inside the opposition's penalty area. The opponent's (Everton) defensive organization is made of a 2 men wall in front of the ball position and mix of zonal defense in front of the goal with a line of 4 and man-marking with the second line of 4 (8 v 6 around the penalty kick cycle); 3 Newcastle players are free along the edge line of the penalty area and just out of the condensed area.



Newcastle often uses the flank play strategy as weapon to create scoring chances from free kicks, exploiting the height of the center forward (Carroll).



The flank play tactics unbalance the opposition defensive shape and all the defenders look at the ball trajectory rather than marking the attackers in front of the goal. The decisive defensive mistake, apart from the lost 1 v 1 duel of the defender near the ball, is the space that the center defender of the second line leaves in the center; 2 Newcastle's players are free to play in between the defensive lines inside the box and very close to the 6 y box.

Those 2 Everton's players run away from the ball position and the opponents; the center defenders are late on the ball and they can't clear it. Newcastle player coordinate quickly and he can shoot without a real pressure while performing the technical gesture.



He can score to the far post without any chance for the goalkeeper to save the goal due to his position near the opposite post and along the line.



In this example, Everton's mixed defensive organization has been misloaded by the flank play near the far post in relation to the free kick point. All defenders looked at the ball's trajectory and they lost the opponent who were marking and the center defenders of the second man-marking line left the space in front of the back 4 zonal line is free. Newcastle attacker could exploit this space due this mistake and the late tackle attempts of the 2 back center defenders, who were standing in front of the goal, following the zonal organization of their line.

Exploiting zone 14 (defensive mistake: defensive line too deep inside the box and no defenders along the edge line of the box looking after opposition's zone 14)

In this next sequence, Newcastle takes another free kick along the sideline of the opposition penalty box (attacking right flank); the player, who is going to kick the ball, is left footed; the opposition (Manchester City) senses an in-swinging free kick, and the defensive shape is then made by 2 men's wall to cover the near post of the goal and a deeper line of 8 player very close to the 6 y box line with numerical advantage (8 v 5).



10 Manchester City players are covering the box and the goal, but no one is covering the opposition's zone 14, where a Newcastle player can receive without pressure, due to a late defensive run of a defender from the 18 y box. Furthermore, the forward movements off all defenders seem to prevent the goalkeeper from looking at the ball while Newcastle's player is shooting; this is another crucial factor that delays the goalkeeper's action to save the goal.



Newcastle can score to the far post of the opposition goal in relation to the free kick point.



In this sequence, the defensive mistakes of a too deep line in relation to the free kick point and the opposition's zone 14 free from defenders made the crucial difference. The player on the ball feinted an in-swinging kick while running toward the ball, but he exploited the freedom of his teammate just out of the box and he allowed the receiver to shoot without pressure. 10 City players were standing too deep inside the box to save the goal, creating a huge numerical advantage along the edge line of the 6 y box without one player along the edge line of the 18 y box who could have press the receive and prevent him from shooting. The disorganized forward movements of the defenders after the free kick prevented their goalkeeper from looking at the ball while the opponent was shooting, and he could only try a delayed saving action at his right.

Drive the ball between the opposition defense line and the goalkeeper (defensive mistakes: defenders are late in covering the space between them and the goalkeeper, their body shapes prevent them from clearing the 6 box, and the goalkeeper don't move out of the goal to anticipate the opponents)

West Ham United takes a free kick around the upper corner of the opposition's box along the attacking left side and the player on the ball is left footed. The opposition (Newcastle) shapes a 2 men wall in front of the ball trying to prevent a cross pass between the defensive line inside the box and the goalkeeper; their position is deeper than the defensive line and it allows a West Ham's attacker to stand goal side in relation to the opponents. A 7 v 4 duel is created along the imaginary line of the penalty kick.



The decisive mistake is anyway another one in front of the far post, as the defenders lose the attacker's marking while the player on the ball kicks an in-swinging pass toward the space between the defensive line and the goalkeeper.



2 West Ham's attackers can meet the ball inside the 6 y box, in play, exploiting the deeper position of the defensive wall in front of the ball; moreover, the defenders don't track them backward and the goalkeeper don't move out of the goal line to try to catch the ball.



The receiver can score without pressure just few yards away from the opposition's goal line.



The defensive mistakes were clear in this situation as Newcastle's players were late in covering the space between them and the goalkeeper, their body shapes prevent them from clearing the 6 box being all turned toward the goal and not toward the field (due to late reactions), and the goalkeeper didn't move out of the goal to anticipate the opponents despite the pass trajectory was travelling through the 6 y box just in front of him.

Drive the ball between the opposition defense line and the goalkeeper after an in-swinging pass feint and a consequent out-swinging pass (defensive mistakes: late defensive reaction after the first feint that make the depth's coverage impossible, the scorer's marker doesn't track his movement toward the goal and the goalkeeper who doesn't move out from the goal line despite the attacker meets the ball inside the 6 y box)

In this last sequence of the book, West Ham United takes a free kick further away from the opposition's box along the attacking left side, in relation to the previous situation of play. 2 West Ham's players are on the ball; one is right footed and the second one is left footed. The opposition (Tottenham) shape a 1 men wall in front of the ball to cover the goal's view; all the rest of the defending team is standing along the edge line of the box, man marking the opponents (4 players); a fifth one starts just few yards away and 2 more stands out of the defensive with the clear aim to win potential second times of the ball.



The only issue that the defenders should play attention to is to understand if the free kick is played with an in-swinging or out-swinging ball's trajectory; when the player on the kicks, many of them are clearly still thinking about this doubt and they don't move backward to save the space between their line and the goal.



The crucial duel is between the second-to-last players, as the defender tries to counter the opponent's run toward the goal at the beginning, but he doesn't track him backward inside the 6 y box; in addition, the goalkeeper doesn't move out the goal line and his position is not really proper nor to cover the near post, neither the far one.



West Ham's player can then score easily without pressure.



The focus of all defenders were on the doubt if to face an in-swinging or an out-swinging free kicks; it's clear how this doubt delayed their backward movements to cover the goal space. 2 individual mistakes were crucial anyway; the scorer's marker didn't track the opponent's run toward the goal and the goalkeeper didn't move out of the goal line despite the attacker met the ball inside the 6 y box).

Summary

The aims of this book is to give an as much as possible complete analysis of the free kicks factors that shape those peculiar situations of play, to provide some useful data to understand how English team carry out free kicks tactically and analyze all the free kicks that led to a goal with few touches the Premier League's teams apart from their rank in the table during this 2019/2020 season.

These are the situations of play that have been analyzed:

- **Free kicks near in the center**
 - Feinting a direct free kick
 - With feint around the ball
 - Free the goalkeeper side
- **Lateral free kicks from the first third**
- **Lateral free kicks in the middle third**
 - Long pass in the box and flank play
 - Through pass
- **Lateral free kicks from the final third**
 - Lob pass
 - Through pass after quick play without opposition distance enquiry
 - With feint
 - Out-swinging pass
 - In swinging pass
 - Drop pass into the opposition's box
 - Flank play inside the box
 - Exploiting zone 14
 - Drive the ball between the opposition defense line and the goalkeeper
 - Drive the ball between the opposition defense line and the goalkeeper after an in-swinging pass feint and a consequent out-swinging pass

At the same time, we should never forgive that DBA are one of the main tactical situations in modern football, as even if the richest clubs are becoming richer and richer, mid and lower table teams are increasing their technical and tactical levels; and even if the differences are always very high, set plays are effective weapons to fill the gap with the top table opponents.

On the other side, free kicks are a weapon for top table team to find the way to win matches against middle and lower table opponents that have increased their tactical level, and that sometimes, but not often, have signed technically gifted players, during the matches where taking the lead becomes harder and harder during the 90'.