



What is the game style that has a 5000:1 team win the English Premier league (EPL)?

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Introduction & Aims: In the 2015/16 EPL season a 5000:1 team won the league. Soccer teams adopt playing strategies that result in observable and repeatable playing patterns referred to as a team's 'game style'. This study quantified game styles among EPL teams to determine the types of styles and the relationships to finishing position.

Methods: All 760 EPL games (20 teams x 38) were analysed. Raw data were provided by OptaPro sports analytics. 100 game-related variables were compared among teams, z-score transformed and coded into 5 discrete 'moments of play'. Moments were categorised as set pieces (SP), established offence (EO), transition to offence (TO), transition to defence (TD), and established defence (ED). The game-specific mean z-score for the five moments of play were used as k-means cluster analysis inputs. The relationship between game style clusters and finishing position was investigated using chi square.

Results: Three clusters were identified: (1) strong in EO and SP and characterised by team's finishing in higher positions (games n=249); (2) moderately favouring ED and prevalent among lower ranked teams (n=270); (3) dominated by TO and TD (n=241) and exclusively over-represented by the EPL champions.

Conclusion: Moments of play analysis show success is associated with dominance in TO and TD periods. These moments involve short but critical phases for asymmetries in player number, location and structure, and winning 50:50 contests. If transition moment style is less successful, control of EO and SP is demonstrated by higher ranked teams. Relegated team games clustered for poor performance in all moments except a moderate strength in ED illustrating the way better teams enforce their game style. Exploring other data sets for factors impacting game styles (match context, playing personnel) will broaden our understanding of game style.