

How can we reduce the number of conceded goals in football?

(Kristian Holm Carlsen 2017)

Introduction

The aim of this short match analysis study is to see how many goals teams can prevent if the coaches teach their players some of the tactical skills that I concretized in my book. Based on my own experiences, players at professional level should learn to master most of these skills within 2-3 weeks. By doing so, the team will concede fewer goals and win more matches. However, the main problem seems not to be to learn these skills per se, but the resistance among coaches and players to be objective, specific, and to rely on science and knowledge.

Methods

The data was collected with the use of match analysis of all the 316 goals from the World cup 2010 and 2014. The 93 goals from set pieces were left out of the study. In regard, the total number of analyzed goals was 223.

Six concrete or specific tactical skills in defence were included in the research. These six tactical skills were grouped into three categories. Category one consists of one individual tactical skill, and named “individual tactical choices for the first defender” (ITC 1D). The second category consists of three individual tactical skills, and named “individual tactical choices for the third defender” (ITC 3D). The last category involves one individual tactical skill and one team skill in order to defend the penalty area. This category is named “defending the box”.

Results

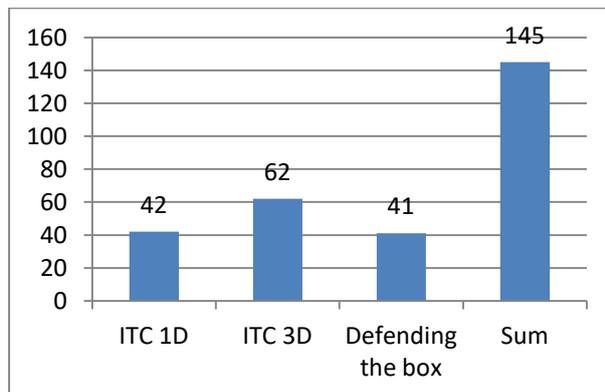


Figure nr. 1: The total number of goals from each category where one or more players did a bad tactical choice in defence. In total, bad tactical choices were involved in 145 or 65 % of the 223 analyzed goals.

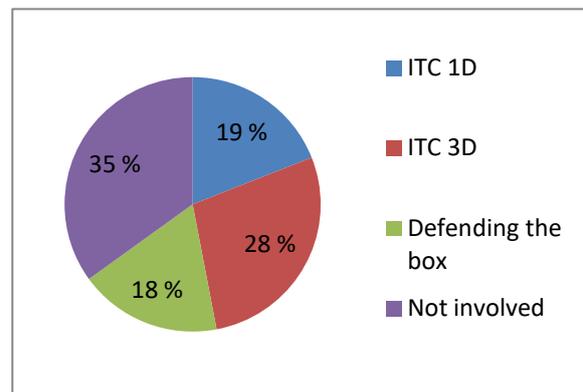


Figure nr. 2: The percentage of the conceded goals from each category where one or more players made a bad tactical choice in defence. “Not involved” means goals that did not involve these six tactical skills.

Discussion

The results indicate that bad individual tactical choices in defence and bad tactical team skills when it comes to defending the penalty area are involved in most of the conceded goals. In 65 % of the conceded goals from open play, one or more players performed poorly on one or more of these six specific skills. However, this does not mean that a team will concede 65 % less goals by teaching the players these skills. Good teams with highly skilled players will most likely manage to find a way to score even if the opponents manage to close the first and second opportunity in an attack, or score later. On the other hand, teaching the players to master these skills perfectly will also result in fewer set pieces against, more turnovers/breakdowns, and some set pieces for. In the next step this might give the defending team goal opportunities and goals. In regard, I think it is fair to suggest that a team can concede 30-40 % less goals by teaching the players these six concrete tactical skills. In fact, two concrete individual tactical skills in defence were involved in 31 % of the goals. And the best thing is that it is quite easy to teach the players these skills if the coaches are well trained in teaching and pedagogic. Top players should at least manage to learn the two most important of these skills in 2-3 weeks.

The reason it should not take such a long time to teach the players these tactical skills are because they are extremely concrete. These skills are either **a)** a tactical choice players should do every time, **b)** a tactical choice between X or Y, or **c)** a tactical choice between X, Y or Z. The whole idea is that the coaches give the players a challenge. The challenge, which is the same as a skill, should then be followed up before, during and after training and games with the use of self regulation by the players, external feedback from the coaches, and video analysis. The same approach can be used to teach the players the most important tactical skills to score more goals.

Finally, a small comparison analysis was conducted for the Norwegian national team in their 2018 world cup qualifier matches and the five last matches for the Norwegian top division team Viking (round 17-21). In the seven matches so far in the world cup qualifier Norway conceded 12 goals in open play. The three categories of skills presented here were involved in six (50 %) of these goals. In regard to Viking, they conceded seven goals in their last five matches. Potentially, six of these seven goals (85 %) could have been prevented if the players mastered the six tactical skills in this study. Hypothetically, that could have given Viking seven more points in their last five matches, and brought them away from the last position in the league.

Conclusion

At top level football is all about winning the next game, and to get enough points to win titles or avoid relegation. Taking into account that a team will get more points by conceding one less goal per match than scoring one more goal, teaching players the skills they need to avoid goals against seems like a good strategy. In regard, this research indicates that some of the most important skills to focus on are six individual tactical skills about choices and decision making for the defending team. The players should also manage to learn all or the most important of the six tactical skills in 2-3 weeks if they and the coaches developed an objective and concrete learning process. Even if there seems to be obstacles and resistance towards objectivity and knowledge in football, history has shown us that science will always win in the end.