

Margins in football – Article 1: Decision making defensively and tactical defending skills

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Introduction and method

Good decision making defensively and tactical defending skills involves winning the ball, or to stop the opponent's from getting a shot, goal scoring opportunity or goal. The objective for the first article about margins in international top football was to find out how often players a top level did a bad decision and/or a bad technical execution defensively when they conceded a goal. Here, we are talking about relatively large errors, and not just to solve the situation differently.

I used indirect match analysis in order to be able to watch the same game situations many times. All the goals from the World Cup 2010 and 2014, around half of the goals for to Norwegian elite teams in the 2020 season, and all the goals in the Euro 2020 qualification for the Norwegian national team were included in the analysis. That means a total of 400 goals, but the 116 goals from set pieces were excluded in the general analysis.

Results and key findings

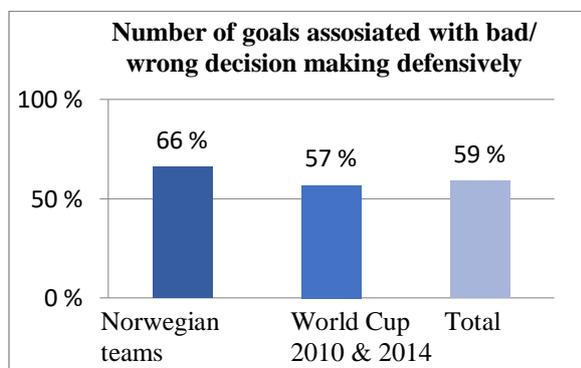


Figure 1: Number of goals from open play where the players on the team who conceded a goal did a bad/wrong decision defensively (bad tactical defending skills). A) Norwegian teams (66 %). B) In the WC 2010 and 2014 (57 %). C) Total (59 %) (n = 284 goals).

Results 1 – Norwegian teams and World Cup:

- 1) Players did a wrong/bad decision defensively in almost 6 out of 10 goals. This means 166 out of 284 goals from open play¹.
- 2) The Norwegian teams had a slightly higher frequency of wrong/bad decisions defensively than the teams in the World Cup 2010 and 2014 (66 % versus 57 %). On the other hand, the difference between the Norwegian club teams and their national team was minimal.

Results 2 – Norwegian teams:

- 1) The Norwegian teams conceded 61goals. Of these goals; **a)** 41 % was associated with wrong/bad decision making defensively, **b)** 8 % was associated with technical errors, and **c)** 25 % was associated with a combination of a and b. For 16 of the 61 goals there was no clear mistake, even thou some will argue that players do mistakes/errors almost every time they concede a goal.
- 2) I also did the same analysis for 24 goal opportunities for one of the Norwegian club teams. The results indicate the same trend as for goals, but more goals following a technical mistake/error, and less goals without any mistakes/errors.
- 3) For one of the Norwegian club teams and the Norwegian national team wrong/bad decision defensively was directly or indirectly involved in 8 out of 13 goals from set pieces.

In sum, these results indicate that football teams can reduce the number of conceded goals if the players learn to make better decision defensively and to develop better tactical defending skills.

¹ Open play refers to all goals except the goals from set pieces (all goals minus goals from set pieces).

I have concretized 35 tactical defending skills and related them to first defender (1D), second defender (2D), and third defender (3D)².

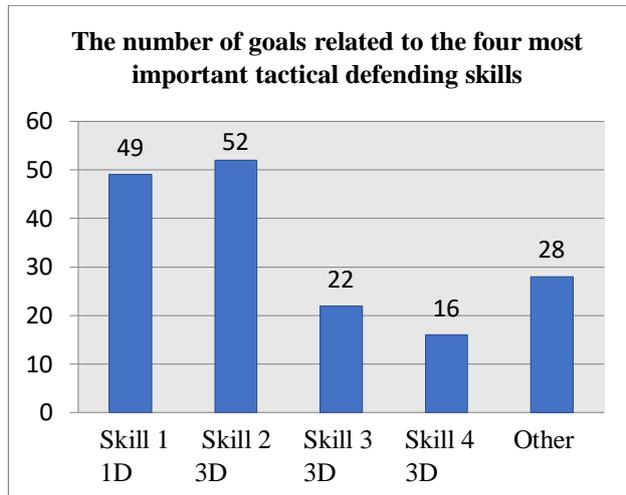


Figure 2: The number of goals related to the four most important tactical defending skills (decision making defensively) in this study. At least one player did a wrong/bad decision defensively in 166 (59 %) of the 284 analysed goals. A total of 138 goals are related to skills 1-4, and some of them are interconnected. Skill 1 and 2 counts for 101 goals, which is 61 % of the goals associated with wrong/bad decision making. 1D = first defender, 3D = third defender and others = seven different defending skills (n = 166 goals).

Result 3 – Tactical defending skills:

- 1) Of 284 goals from open play, at least one player did a wrong/bad decision defensively in 166 goals. Of these 166 goals, 111 (66 %) goals are related to the third defender (3D).
- 2) One interesting observation is that 138 out of 166 goals associated with wrong/bad decision defensively are related to four specific skills. Two of these skills are interconnected, and are involved in 61 % of the 166 goals.
- 3) In 13% of the 166 goals above the nearest third defender (3D) dropped off too late.

² The first defender (1D) is the defender who is pressing the player with the ball. The second defender (2D) is the player who supports 1D. All the other defenders are third defenders (3D), and their task is to cover space or mark/track opponents.

Based on these result, it seems like a good idea to priority the skills in figure 2 in the daily work on the pitch.

Results 3 – Goal analysis of the Norwegian national team and finals in some World Cups

- 1) Hypothetically, Norway lost 12 points in the Euro 2020 (2021) qualification as a consequence of bad decisions defensively.
- 2) In the semi-finals and finals in the World Cups 2010-2018, 5 out of 9 matches were decided after a wrong/bad decision defensively by one or several players.

Summary

Table 1: A summary of the results in this study, and an indication of the excising margins when it comes to tactical defending skills and decision making defensively in international elite football.

Variable/skill	Share/number
How many goals are associated with bad decisions defensively?	6 out of 10 goals from open play
How many of the goals associated with bad decisions defensively are related to four tactical defending skills?	83 % (138 out of 166 goals)
How often did the nearest third defender drop off too late?	In 13 % of the 166 goals above
How often was bad/wrong decision making defensively directly or indirectly involved in conceded goals from set play for two Norwegian teams?	In 8 out of 13 analysed set pieces
How many points did Norway hypothetically lost in the Euro 2020 (2021) qualification as a consequence of bad decisions defensively or technical errors?	12 points
How many of the matches in the semi-finals and finals in the World Cups 2010-2018 were decided by a wrong/bad decision defensively by one or several players?	5 out of 9 matches