

Performance Analysis: Collecting Stats

By Ryan Knapp and Mark Roberts, *Statzpack*

Statistics, including performance measurements and event analyses, are commonly used in sports such as baseball and American football, in both professional and non-professional venues. However, although professional soccer is flooded with statistics relating to players, most recreational, junior, and college soccer teams still use statistics minimally.

A big dilemma for coaches when it comes to recording and making use of stats is weighing the effort versus the return. How much time will it take to gather the data? How can this data be used to affect player development and performance? Who is going to do it? Which data should be recorded and why? Was there any real tangible value provided by taking statistics over the short and long term? By the time you've asked all those questions many of us move on to other items on our schedule.

In developing *Statzpack*, we worked with the Sports Institute at the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland. Its input and research helped us define the challenges faced by coaches operating from grassroots up to youth international levels.

Furthermore, they found that there is a disconnect between a coach's desire to use some type of stats system and the knowledge and ability to do so. Specifically, many coaches are often disinclined to use performance analysis and statistics in their coaching approach because they lack the know-how, and see it as a heavy burden on their time, even though they think statistics are a valuable coaching tool.

Below are six tips to enable coaches to start using stats in a meaningful way for their soccer team

Define the stats you want to use and be consistent. Pick two to four stats that are relevant to you as a coach, your system of play and level at which you coach. Don't become swayed by what may work for a pro team or the volume of stats they can achieve.

To help you decide which stats to use, talk to players and other coaches. The set of stats collected should be agreed upon within the team. Set out a core set of stats you will record for each game and follow that core throughout the season. Recording the same set of data over a season or campaign will be more useful than chopping and changing at each game. This approach supports player development over the longer term. You can add different stats to particular games, or at certain points in the season add or delete, but if you can, establish a core set and it keep it consistent.

Practice collecting statistics. Don't forget to try out your stats set in training or at a challenge game. Review and discuss the stats collected. Are they useful? Is it reasonable or possible to collect these stats for every game? Can the stats collected be used to give feedback in a timely and meaningful manner? If the answer is no to any of these questions, set out another plan for collecting stats and practice until you find what works.

Give players feedback. Feedback is the food of champions, but it can also choke up the toughest of players. Players appreciate information on their performance, but they will be receptive to it only if they feel it is balanced and constructive – too much emphasis on the negative is a sure way to close the ears. Do not fall into the trap of collecting only negative data about your players. Also, never use data to beat up on a player. Harping on Jordan for 10 unsuccessful passes and only one good pass all match will accomplish nothing in the long run. Get in the habit of choosing positives to start your stats feedback and always end on a constructive note.

When giving feedback to your players make sure they can digest it. Timing is a key factor. Make sure you use clear language that focuses on the outcome you want, and not just on the numbers. Use the data to drive your message; don't let it be your message.

Moreover, provide the most feedback at practices or training sessions when you have more time to communicate and explain the stats.

Remember the short and long term. Statistics can provide you with instant summary of a match, but they need to be looked at in the long term. Look for trends across matches as well as data points within a match. Make sure to balance short-term and long-term statistics in order to avoid jumping to conclusions and changing your training plans from week to week.

Statistics have limits. Remember that statistics have limits. For example, the data you have recorded will rarely tell you the cause or solution to a specific problem. As a coach, it is your job to look at a statistic and be able to identify the underlying cause.

For example, if you notice your team misses the net often on shots, it could be because your players do not know how to strike the ball. Let's say, in your next practice you choose to run a series of drills to see how players strike the ball accurately. When you do this you realize on half volleys your players consistently lean back and send the ball over the bar.

Now, you can work on developing better half-volley techniques with your players. Furthermore, any improvement in this skill can be assessed in the next match by comparing the same statistic. Your goal is to use statistics to make better players and a better team.

Combine stats with your knowledge and experience. For years, 95 percent of soccer coaches have relied on intuition and observation in analysis of their team (and that's a stat we made up!). Simply remembering from your gut is not good enough. Memory is subjective and as human beings we all are biased. A good healthy mix of data and coaching knowhow is the most effective way to utilize stats to your advantage without using them as a crutch or an excuse for your team's play. A poor coach with loads of statistics is still a poor coach; a great coach with statistics is still a great coach, but now he or she has an unbiased view to help develop better soccer players.

In summary, adopting a more analytical approach to coaching soccer and collecting stats need not be either a chore or applied rocket science. Start off with a simple approach and build your expertise and database over time. ⚽

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