

SAM HUDSON

FOOTBALL IN A PANDEMIC

AN INSIGHT INTO THE STRATEGIES
AND TACTICS USED DURING THE 2020/21
PREMIER LEAGUE SEASON



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Introduction

IT HAS long been said within the coaching world that the best coaches are the best thieves. This book supports that notion entirely, taking a multitude of ideas, structures, principles, and tactics across the 2020/2021 Premier League season and hopefully providing an insight into the huge amount of detail and flexibility involved, and the level of utter genius at which the most elite head coaches frequently operate.

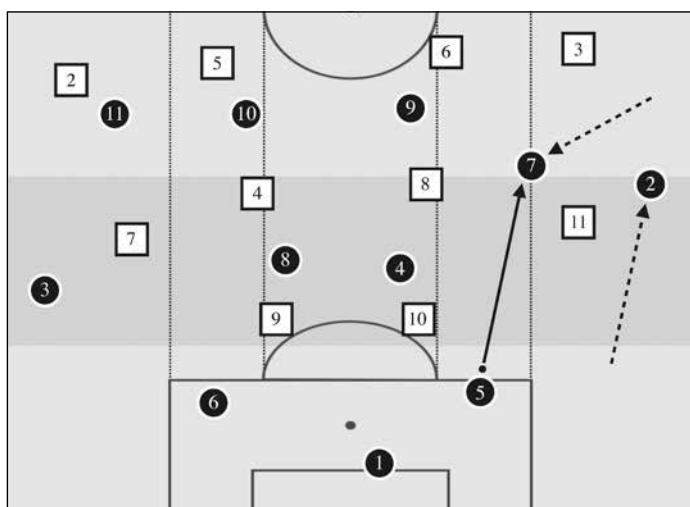
Unfortunately, not everything across the season can be covered, and not every team in the league will have a focused section, particularly from a season such as 2020/21 which will live long in the memory for reasons both on and off the field. However, the topic which almost all fans enjoy the most – scoring goals – will touch upon all 20 of the Premier League sides.

It's appreciated that not everyone reading this will be a coach, or an analyst of some sort. It can also be

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guaranteed that the terminology used will not be universal, even within the footballing world. Therefore, for clarity of understanding, certain phrases and ideas will be highlighted here prior to progressing on to the tactics and strategies themselves.

Most people are familiar with a football pitch's layout and shape. But for added detail and rationale, each diagram will be split into five vertical lanes. In some cases these are ordered numerically as one to five, but moving forward these vertical lanes will be described using specific terminology. The two outer lanes are classed as the 'Wide Areas', while the middle space running vertically from top to bottom is the 'Central Lane'. The two remaining areas are defined as 'Inside Channels'. Sometimes they are referred to



as the ‘Half-Spaces’, but that phrase has never really appealed to me.

With further regard to the diagrams themselves, the main team of focus will always appear from the bottom facing up. This is a relatively simple yet effective trick I learned as a coach. From the players’ perspective, and now you, the reader, this is to prevent further confusion, keeping the left-back, for example, on the left-hand side of the board, and now diagram. For additional clarity, the specific team of focus will also appear as black circles, with the more generic opposition as white squares. Dashed arrows simulate player movements or dribbles if in possession of the ball, with solid arrows simulating a pass. On some diagrams players will be faded, indicating their starting position before performing a specific movement.

Players’ numbers can also be a source of contention and debate within football. Here, they may appear different to what is seen elsewhere. Goalkeepers, as is universally accepted, are classed as 1, with the full-backs or wing-backs as 2 and 3. Central defenders will primarily appear as 5 and 6, with the defensive midfielder, also referred to as the single pivot on occasion, prioritised as number 4. Two defensive midfielders may also be referred to as a double pivot. The more offensive central midfielders are often assigned 8

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and 10, with the right-winger at 7, left-winger at 11, and central forward at 9.

However, due to different base structures to begin with – such as two central forwards, back threes, midfield diamonds – the numbers may move around slightly. But the main aim is to again provide consistency, and then an explanation of the why behind the strategy, or idea. Various individual players in the same position will also demonstrate differing roles, positions, and ideas throughout the book, yet the same number for that position will apply where possible.

Should a full-back (2, 3) move into a central midfield position, for example, they will still hold the same number. The numbers on the diagrams also won't correspond to the players' actual squad numbers from the 2020/21 season. João Cancelo of Manchester City, for example, will always be 2, and not 27, his official Premier League number for the 2020/21 season, no matter which part of the pitch he moves into.

All open-play moments have been covered across the book, beginning with the attacking phase. This is split into three further chapters of build-up play, creating the attack, and then a brief look at the goals themselves. The two moments of transition, where possession of the ball changes between the two teams, follows as

section two, with counter-attacking play, and then the transition into defence being the main points of focus.

The third and final section focuses on the prolonged defensive strategies, starting with pressing high up the pitch, moving into mid-block defending, and then a final overlook of the low block, and deep defending strategies. Although the moment of focus will take up the majority of the content, it will hopefully connect into various other moments in the game and not be viewed totally in isolation, particularly as the Premier League can be, at times, very chaotic.

Season 2020/21

THE COVID-19 virus halted Premier League football in March 2020 after Arsenal head coach Mikel Arteta returned a positive test. Leicester City's 4-0 victory over Aston Villa in game 288 of the 2019/20 season became the last Premier League action for some time. Four days prior, the first COVID death had been registered in the UK.

One hundred days after the events at the King Power Stadium, match 289 ignited Project Restart with Premier League football resuming as Aston Villa were again involved, this time holding Sheffield United to a relatively drab 0-0 at Villa Park. The match was arguably most memorable for a rare error involving Hawk-Eye's goal-line technology system.

The remaining 91 matches were played across June and July 2020, with zero fans, temperature checks,

weekly testing of players and staff, and simulated crowd noise soon becoming the norm. Liverpool were crowned champions; Norwich City, Watford, and Bournemouth were relegated to the Championship and 2019/2020 was finally concluded.

Scheduling

The off-season has long been an essential aspect of the football calendar. Predominantly designed to provide enough rest for both staff and players, this period proves especially important for those involved in summer international tournaments. Between 2015 and 2019, the gap between Premier League campaigns averaged 88 days, providing ample physical and mental recuperation time before squads focused on a carefully planned fitness regime to best prepare for the season ahead.

Yet 2019/20 overran by 71 days – almost an entire off-season in itself – with the summer’s European Championships also being postponed by a year. This left a break of just 49 days for both players and staff to recover from the disrupted yet still demanding campaign before then implementing a drastically shortened pre-season schedule prior to 2020/2021. Chelsea, Manchester City, Manchester United, and Wolverhampton Wanderers also had further European fixtures to complete after their domestic campaign had

ended, giving them a further delay to their 2020/21 schedule.

Where possible, leagues will look to begin and finish seasons slightly earlier, allowing for an easier transition into summer tournaments. The three Premier League seasons prior to the COVID-19 disruptions lasted on average for 278 days each. But as the Premier League was forced into an extremely tight window to complete 2020/21, play was concluded within 254 days. Excluding the prolonged season of 2019/20, 2020/21 had the Premier League's latest finish since 2015, ending on 23 May 2021.

Despite the need for an early finish before any adaptation to the summer's rearranged European Championships, 2020/21 was played in an extremely condensed timeframe.

Players and staff were expected to deliver the highest standards of performance across a 380-game season – plus extra cup competitions thrown in – in this much shortened schedule, while coming off the back of a severely shortened rest period. With the 2022 World Cup in Qatar to be played in a reduced timeframe of 28 days towards the end of the year – the first World Cup to be completed outside of May, June, or July – coupled with the proposed expansion of events such as the UEFA Champions League, and the attempted

European Super League, COVID-19 further aggravated already tense scheduling issues.

The traditional football calendar over the festive period has long set English football apart from many other European leagues. However, the Premier League introduced a mid-season break in February 2019, allowing players and staff to recover after so many games in such a condensed timeframe, while still maintaining the traditional and often exciting festive period of matches. This break was scrapped for 2020/21.

With 2020/21 unable to offer a even a brief pause in fixtures, additional midweek matches were then crammed into an already shortened season. In the three seasons prior to COVID-19, the Premier League averaged 48 fixtures on a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday, excluding Boxing Day, and New Year's Day matches. Through 2019/20 this increased to 64, albeit with the majority of these after Project Restart. The condensed 2020/21 then had 77 as teams frequently played three matches in seven days. In Manchester United's case, they were forced to play three Premier League games in just five days with only one rest day in between each one.

Injuries

Due to the tempo and speed of play at the highest level of professional football, a single match leads to acute

fatigue, requiring several days to fully recover. Matches within a few days of one another, however, repeated over numerous weeks and months, quickly leads to chronic fatigue [1]. With the Premier League one of the most intense and fast-paced competitions around, the resting period is arguably just as important as the players' actual performances.

A study [2] found that 60 per cent of players who underperformed at the 2002 FIFA World Cup had played a mean of 12.5 matches in the ten weeks prior to the tournament, whereas players deemed to perform better than anticipated had played just nine times in the same period.

In 2010 it was found [1] that competing in the UEFA Champions League, and thus increasing the matches per week from one to two, increased the injury rate of players by more than six times. This was later confirmed [3] in a study focusing on 27 different teams, competing over 11 seasons. Total injury rates and muscle injury rates both increased in league matches with less than, or equal to, four days of recovery time, compared to at least six days of recovery.

According to premierinjuries.com, compared to the disrupted 2019/20 Premier League season there was a 23 per cent rise in muscular injuries over the first nine game weeks of 2020/21. Up to and including game

week 21 through 2019/20, there were 356 injuries where players had to miss at least one league game. This number rose to 374 at the same point through 2020/21, and increased significantly to 435 when COVID-19-related absences were factored in.

Liverpool were particularly affected by injuries as by game week 26 players had been sidelined for a total of 1,032 days, with Crystal Palace the second worst off at that point in the campaign, with 864 days missed. As well as the lengthy onfield injuries best highlighted by the absentees within their central defence, several Liverpool players also tested positive for COVID-19 and were forced to isolate as a result. Despite having to close their training ground due to a COVID-19 outbreak in January 2021, Aston Villa had only missed 428 days through injury, the fourth lowest after the first 25 game weeks.

Substitutions

One new aspect of Project Restart saw the Premier League increase the amount of substitutions to five per match, with the bench also increasing to nine instead of the usual seven. However, this wasn't continued into 2020/21, and votes on three separate occasions from all 20 clubs failed to reach the 14 required for a change of law. The Premier League then became the only major league in Europe to return to three substitutions for the

2020/21 campaign, with five substitutes still in place for both the Champions League and Europa League. In England itself, the Premier League also stood alone as both the FA Cup and EFL Cup allowed five substitutions per game.

Although the bench increased back to nine after game week 14, and 'Additional Permanent Concussion Substitutions' were also introduced midway through the season, many head coaches were still frustrated at their inability to rotate multiple players mid-game.

When five subs were available after Project Restart, many teams often elected to use the new maximum on offer, with 80 per cent of teams using all five at least once. From the 92 matches in total, five subs were utilised at 32.1 per cent, and proved the most frequent selection. Four subs closely followed at 29.9 per cent, with fewer than three subs only used at 17.9 per cent across the remainder of the season.

Champions Liverpool utilised five subs more than any other option during their post-break matches, as did Bournemouth, Brighton & Hove Albion, Everton, Newcastle United, and Norwich City. These latter five clubs all finished in 12th place or below, and Burnley were the only side in the entire league to average fewer subs per match during Project Restart compared to the games prior.

Moving into the 2020/21 season, only two of the sides who finished in the top four were among the highest 11 for most substitutions made across the season – Liverpool and Chelsea. And from those same 11, six of these sides finished tenth or lower in the final table, with champions Manchester City using the lowest amount of substitutions across the season. The notion, then, that the extra substitutions rule only benefits the clubs towards the top of the table can certainly be challenged.

Home vs. Away

The theory of home advantage has long been known throughout professional football, with ‘tough’ away fixtures often predicted across the season. The impact of the home support has been proven to play a part in this as additional confidence and positivity within players’ performances have been identified as key variables, obtained via that perceived advantage [4].

Looking at the three Premier League seasons prior to 2019/20, home victories accounted for 47.4 per cent of all results, with away wins averaging at 30.3 per cent. Stretching across the ten years prior, away wins averaged at just 28.7 per cent of matches.

Project Restart not only saw matches played behind closed doors, but also at an unprecedented schedule.

Games devoid of fans have often been associated with punishments, with crowds having been banned from attending due to clubs' wrongdoing. However, the COVID-19 pandemic stopped crowds gathering for all Premier League football, and they only returned momentarily during 2020/21.

A study [5] assessed whether the lack of social pressure from spectators affected behaviour and outcomes. It assessed 160 matches behind closed doors since the beginning of the 2002/03 European season prior to April 2020. A comparison with over 33,000 other matches showed that, on average, the home team won on 36 per cent of occasions without crowds, and 46 per cent with an audience. This was accompanied by a significant increase in away victories during behind-closed-doors matches, also accounting for fewer goals scored by the home sides. However, this study only focused on games in Italy and France due to the lack of such fixtures between 2002 and 2020 in the other top European leagues.

Prior to the COVID-enforced Premier League break, home win percentage averaged at 44.3 per cent. Post-break, this actually improved marginally to 48.7 per cent. However, similar results also appeared regarding away victories; before the pause in the schedule away wins stood at 30.2 per cent, whereas after it they only marginally improved to 32.2 per cent.

A cluster of games during December 2020 saw a maximum of 4,000 spectators attending a Premier League match, hosted by a club within the UK Government's Tier 1 region. Tier 2 then capped any attendance to a maximum of 2,000 fans, while Tier 3 and Tier 4 blocked all attendance completely. Crucially, in any region, away travel and support was still strictly prohibited.

Chelsea were the first club to welcome fans back to a Premier League match, beating Leeds 3-1 in front of 2,000 fans, with a handful of games then following over the coming weeks. However, after multiple reviews updating the tier locations, Liverpool and Everton became the final two clubs allowed to admit a select few before they too were forced to perform back in front of four empty stands. Premier League clubs were then allowed to welcome up to 10,000 home fans, or 25 per cent of a stadium's total capacity – whichever figure was lower – for the final two rounds of fixtures in 2020/21. Away support was once again prohibited.

Looking across the entire season, there were more away points won than home points for the first time in Premier League history, with 153 victories secured on the road. Compared to the 144 home victories, this proved a significant change as the highest number of away wins since 2010 in the Premier League had

stood at 128 in 2018/19. Manchester United remained undefeated across all 19 away matches, while eight of the top ten won more points away from home than they did in their own stadiums. However, from the bottom half of the table, only four sides secured more away wins than at home. Although fans don't account for the entirety of the final result, the 2020/21 season has proved they certainly can contribute towards it.

The Referee

The absence of a crowd has also been shown to impact refereeing performances. A report [6] summarised that a home crowd can influence the decision-making of an official, specifically within a professional sporting context. It was also shown [7] that football fans themselves believe they do affect the outcome of matches, especially in favour of their own side, through the influencing of refereeing decisions.

Another report [5] found that behind-closed-doors matches provided significant differences in how the referees disciplined the away side. On average, visiting teams were awarded a third of a yellow card more per match when facing the presence of home support. However, this difference generally disappeared behind closed doors, suggesting that the referee can be affected by the social pressures provided by the dominance of

home team support, and thus punishes the away side more severely.

A study [8] of 841 matches behind closed doors across the 2019/20 season, in the first and second divisions in England, France, Germany, and Spain, focused on the impact of crowd noise on both the home advantage, and any unconscious referee bias. The results suggested that home advantage was reduced compared to the average across the previous three seasons within the same competitions, but still existed. The referees did not reveal any bias favouring the home sides during these matches regarding fouls, bookings, penalties, or extra time awarded, indicating that this factor may be affected by the presence of the social pressures provided by home spectators.

Across the 2018/19 Premier League season there were 64 more yellow cards awarded to the away sides, with 62 during the disrupted 2019/20 season. However, that gap dropped significantly during 2020/21, with a difference of just 12. This drop was not repeated regarding red cards though, with the number awarded to away sides increasing very slightly through 2020/21.

VAR

The Video Assistant Referee (VAR) was introduced to Premier League football in 2019/20 to help minimise

officiating errors through the use of supportive technology. Clubs unanimously approved the use of VAR into a second season, in line with the full FIFA VAR protocol. During its Premier League debut in 2019/20, VAR directly affected 109 goals or incidents across the 380 matches.

From these 109 overturned decisions, Newcastle United were the only side not to face a decision changed against their favour. Twenty-seven overturns led to goals, with 56 goals chalked off. Twenty-two penalties were awarded – nine of which were missed anyway – with seven penalties taken away after initially being awarded by the onfield officials. Thirty-four goals were ruled out for offside, with eight awarded after an incorrect offside decision prior. Fourteen goals were disallowed for handball and just two were allowed after a wrong handball decision. And finally, nine red cards were awarded through VAR, with three overturned after a second look.

VAR changed slightly for the 2020/21 season, with the referee making more use of the pitchside TV than before. Assistant referees also kept their offside flags down until the end of the attacking phase, whether that came from a goal, or as the ball went out of play for the attacking side. In the previous season, if a flag was raised it was up to the referee to stop the game. The

Premier League initially elected not to enforce VAR to check whether a goalkeeper had moved off his line during penalty kicks. However, through 2020/21 this was changed as goalkeepers were ruthlessly checked, and then booked on each offence after their first warning.

Moving into 2020/21, VAR directly affected 128 goals or incidents across the season, an increase of 19 from the year prior. Seven more goals were awarded, totalling at 34, with 42 then disallowed, a decrease of 14. Thirty-two of those ruled out were for an offside call, as seven were then awarded after an initial incorrect call regarding offside. A further six were ruled out for handball.

Seventeen red cards were awarded via VAR, with just two then overturned after an initial onfield dismissal. Three penalties were ordered to be retaken after a goalkeeper had encroached off his line. Wilfried Zaha, Mateusz Klich and Bruno Fernandes all then scored their subsequent second efforts.

In total, Burnley and Everton had the best net score regarding VAR overturns in their favour of +4 across 2020/21, with Arsenal, Liverpool, and West Bromwich Albion all suffering the most with a joint worst net total of -6 overturns against. Liverpool actually had 13 decisions overturned against them across the season, with a total of seven goals disallowed.