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RECORD BREAKERS

THE TACTICS BEHIND
LIVERPOOL AND
MANCHESTER CITY'S
TITLE TRIUMPHS AND
RECORD POINTS TOTALS



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Introduction

Table 1

Team	Season	Points
Manchester City	2017/18	100
Liverpool	2019/20	99
Manchester City	2018/19	98
Liverpool	2018/19	97
Chelsea	2004/05	95

Table 2

Team	Years	Points
Manchester City	2017–19	198
Liverpool	2018–20	196
Chelsea	2004–06	186
Manchester United	2011–13	178
Manchester United	2007–09	177

*since start of 38-game format

THE FOUR highest points totals registered in Premier League history were all achieved by either Pep Guardiola's Manchester City or Jürgen Klopp's Liverpool (*Table 1*). Combining their title-winning seasons of 2017/18 and 2018/19, City won an incredible 198 points from an available 228, including the only 100-point season on record (*Table 2*). Combining 2018/19, when they finished second, and 2019/20, when they won the league title, Liverpool registered an

equally remarkable 196 points from the 228 available, including 99 in a single season. During these periods, City also won an FA Cup and two League Cups, and Liverpool won the Champions League. These points totals present a strong argument that these were the best two teams the Premier League has ever seen.

For context, let's assess the success of some other great teams of the Premier League era. In the mid-2000s, José Mourinho's Chelsea managed 186 points across two consecutive seasons, a full ten and 12 points shy of Liverpool and City's best totals. None of the best Sir Alex Ferguson Manchester United teams achieved more than 91 points since the beginning of the 38-game format, registering a high of 92 in 1993/94, when they played 42 games. Finally, Arsène Wenger's Arsenal failed to earn more than 90 points, despite going unbeaten throughout the 2003/04 season. Undoubtedly, the City and Liverpool sides of these seasons were special teams.

How much influence do tactics have on the achievement of record points?

It is important to describe what constitutes 'tactics', and assess the level of their contribution to City and Liverpool winning a record number of points. Ultimately, tactics refer to the positions that players take up, the movements they make, and the actions they carry out, both at the team and individual level. These positions, movements and actions may vary depending on the location of the ball, the space, and the positioning and actions of their opponents and team-mates, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Tactics have the aim of ensuring both the team and its individuals function to their maximum, both in and out of possession, in order to facilitate the two most important controllable factors in winning both an

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individual match, and subsequently a league: creating goalscoring opportunities, and simultaneously preventing the opposition from creating chances of their own. In possession, tactics do not solely affect the creation of opportunities, but also the prevention, while out-of-possession tactics can influence a team's own creation, as well as the prevention of the opposition's. A team's tactics could be specific to facing an individual opponent or style of opponent, or represent their overall way of playing regardless of the opponent.

But how important are tactics in winning football matches, leagues, and ultimately record Premier League points? Before answering this question, it needs to be made clear that we are describing tactics decided by the manager, not by the players themselves. Even if a manager were to select 11 players and a formation without giving them any instructions, a certain amount of tactics would still take place; players would take up positions, make movements and perform actions which could be considered tactics, based on their judgement of situations occurring during an individual match. In addition, players may discuss among themselves what to do in certain situations as a team, or within a particular section of a team. However, the players' choice of tactics would likely be largely defined by what suits them as individuals. Crucially, it is the inter-related positioning and actions of the team as a whole, or within individual sections of the team, which maximises its potential to create and prevent goalscoring opportunities, and therefore win games. This is where the role of the manager in deciding and implementing a team's tactics is so vital; he instructs his players with the benefit of the whole team in mind, *as well as* for the benefit of each individual, driven both by his particular philosophy and the attributes of the players he has available to him.

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The extent to which tactics contribute to winning is a matter of opinion, as it is impossible to measure. Some pundits downplay or even disregard the importance of tactics, suggesting that it is simply the ability of the players which dictates success and failure. This opinion is missing the point. Of course, possessing better players than the opposition is an incredibly important factor in winning football matches and leagues, but the point of tactics is to extract the maximum performance out of a group of players. For example, to enable an inferior team to close the gap on a superior team, to make one of two evenly matched teams superior, or to raise the level of a superior team even higher. Jürgen Klopp discovered the importance of tactics while a player at Mainz under Wolfgang Frank, who used to show his players videos of Arrigo Sacchi's training sessions at AC Milan. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Klopp commented, 'We used to think before then that if the other players are better, you had to lose. After that we learned anything is possible – you can beat teams by having better tactics.' The ability of a group of players is subjective; it is very easy to say in hindsight that the team who wins the league simply has the best players. Perhaps Klopp's assistant manager Pep Lijnders best sums up the relationship between players, tactics and success: 'Without good players there's no collective. But without collective there will never be success.'

Besides, how much is a player's 'ability' related to how he is used by the manager of his team? Would, for example, Sadio Mané and Mo Salah have such outstanding goal records if Klopp's system of play didn't supply them with so many passes close to the opposition goal, from where they could do maximum damage? Would Kevin De Bruyne have the same reputation if Guardiola used him on the wing, where he had played earlier in his career, rather than as a

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central attacking midfielder, a role which has enabled his talents to flourish? Some people may argue that both City and Liverpool's record points-winning teams contained the best groups of players assembled in Premier League history. But were they better than the Manchester United team of Ronaldo, Rooney, Scholes, Ferdinand and Vidic, or the Chelsea side featuring Cech, Terry, Lampard, Drogba and Robben? Were their players even significantly better than those of their rivals during their record points-winning seasons? Whatever the ability level of the players available to City and Liverpool, the tactics implemented by Guardiola and Klopp arguably *increased* the gap between these two teams and their rivals. Could Guardiola and Klopp have finished first and second without the tactics they implemented? Possibly, but they would not have won as many points; simply having great players is not enough to win points so consistently and achieve the totals they registered.

One reason for some pundits or even managers failing to recognise the importance of tactics may be that when they were playing or managing, detailed tactics were not essential because very few teams used them, at least in English football; instead, any tactics that were applied tended to be fairly basic and similar between teams. Premier League matches from the 1990s or even 2000s do not closely resemble the majority of matches in the modern-day Premier League; they were incredibly fast-paced, with less controlled possession. The ball tended to be passed forwards quickly with both teams constantly fighting for the 'second ball'; there was less time for either the attacking or defending team to form a coherent team shape, or to progress the ball forward in a controlled manner. Other than relying on possessing better players, trying harder than an opponent was the perceived way a team could increase their chances of winning. Therefore, players and managers

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from previous eras were accustomed to attributing results to the level of effort applied. Television pundit Graeme Souness, who was a Premier League manager in the 1990s and 2000s, once said, 'I'm fed up of listening to people talk bull about tactics and formations and too much football science. Get to the ball first and you've got a chance in football. Simple as.'

Concluding that 'getting to the ball first' is the main key to winning a modern top-level football match, while dismissing the role of tactics, needs questioning. For example, this mantra did not help City or Liverpool break down a deep opposition defensive shape, nor was it the most important factor for City and Liverpool's opponents themselves in preventing them from creating chances; tactics played a vital role. Souness's comments show that he still sees football as it was during his era, when the sport has undergone significant changes. In fact, 'getting to the ball first' itself is not down solely to physical effort, but also related to tactics; the planned positioning of players was a vital factor in City and Liverpool beating their opponents to the ball in various scenarios.

This is not to deny that the effort of the players remains essential in the modern Premier League; for example, there is no doubt that the work ethic of City and Liverpool was extremely high during their most successful seasons. However, the key point is that a team can't win record points without high levels of effort *and* tactics; the importance of one does not dismiss the importance of the other. Yet people both inside and outside the professional game are often too keen to attribute success and failure to one overall factor, when winning consistently in football is multi-dimensional. The ability of the players, their physical capacity, their effort levels, and even less-controllable factors – such as

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missed chances, defensive mistakes, refereeing decisions, and the timing of key events – all contribute to how many points a team gains during a season, *alongside* the tactics. The more optimal the tactics, the lesser the extent to which a manager has to rely on these other factors; tactics are an element a manager *can* control.

For City and Liverpool, how their players' effort is applied is equally as important as the effort itself. Effort in football isn't so much about which team or player runs the most, nor the fastest; instead the key is to run sufficiently at the correct moments. There is no doubt that City and Liverpool's players sprinted when they needed to sprint and were aggressive when they needed to be aggressive. But this effort and aggression took place in the context of their tactical framework; it was organised. For example, the strategy of pressing relies on significant effort, but its organisation is also vital; it is not simply about randomly sprinting around. Some managers, usually those who give their players limited tactical instruction, often attribute a defeat to a lack of effort or fight from the players. Whether they actually believe this, or they simply use it to blame the players and deflect from their lack of a clear tactical plan, is debatable. Other managers simply can't understand the necessity for detailed tactics. For example, Alan Pardew, following his spell as manager of ADO Den Haag in the Netherlands, a country where tactics are ingrained in football culture, commented, 'The players were needy in terms of wanting to know exactly the game plan, what their role is, that information.' Surely it can only help for the players to know exactly what is expected of them in every scenario. Compare Pardew's quote to the view of Guardiola, who once defined tactics as 'about ensuring that every player knows what he should be doing at all times, and in every position he occupies during a match'.

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In *The Mixer*, Michael Cox outlines how more detailed tactics in the Premier League were introduced, evolved and became more widespread over the years. Cox suggests that much of José Mourinho's success in his first spell with Chelsea was due to the fact that he was using more advanced tactics than the rest of the Premier League. He also proposes that Sir Alex Ferguson's Manchester United, a team that dominated the Premier League for many years, were more tactically advanced than their domestic rivals because of what Ferguson had learned from playing in the Champions League, a competition which featured teams with different systems and ideas to the Premier League.

As modern tactics have become more advanced, so have the tactics to counteract them. For example, as teams identified the space between the midfield and defensive lines as important to access in order to create high-quality goalscoring opportunities, opponents began to focus more on staying compact centrally to prevent this. A similar pattern often occurs; a new tactical system or pattern of play is introduced with early success, before opponents find solutions. For example, Antonio Conte's use of a 3-4-3 system in his first season with Chelsea was a significant tactical innovation which opponents struggled to cope with, resulting in an impressive league title win and 93 points. However, in his second season, Chelsea won just 70 points, with many teams coping by matching Chelsea up with a back-three system themselves. Some of City and Liverpool's tactics and even their systems of play themselves had never previously been used in the Premier League. Perhaps the advanced level of City's system of play is well known, as Guardiola has carried the reputation of a tactically innovative manager from his Barcelona days. In the case of Klopp's Liverpool, however, usually their success is heavily

attributed to their physical intensity; this book aims to explain why their tactical ideas were equally as important.

Out-of-possession tactics arguably became more widespread earlier than in-possession tactics; in the modern-day Premier League some teams still tend to focus to a greater extent on their out-of-possession game plan than in-possession, which has traditionally been viewed as largely up to players to do what they do best as individuals. The word *shape* for example, is more indicative of how a team sets up to defend than attack. In fact, many managers, such as Diego Simeone, José Mourinho and Rafael Benítez, are considered ‘tactically astute’ because they excel at organising a team without the ball and creating chances on the counter-attack. However, managers have had to become more and more tactically astute *in possession* in order to break down opponents who allow them the ball and defend deep. Collective tactics are often key to breaking down deep, compact opponents. Some modern managers take inspiration from a concept termed *juego de posición*, which translates literally as ‘positional play’. It is complex to define, but in basic terms, it concerns the application of precise positional structure, traditionally only seen when a team is *out of possession*, to *in-possession* tactics. Out of possession, every team has a positional structure and defensive principles, determined by four factors, all designed to ensure necessary superiority in key areas: the position of the ball, the location of space, and the position of both their opponents and teammates. One interpretation of *juego de posición* is that it concerns having a positional structure and principles *in possession*, using the aforementioned four factors as a reference, with the same goal: to achieve superiority. People often describe teams as *well organised* out of possession, yet rarely do you hear a team described as such

in possession. During their most successful periods, City and Liverpool were both very well organised *with* the ball.

The book is an interpretation of the tactics of these two teams, as overall systems, but also broken down into specific scenarios and parts of the pitch. It attempts to explain their effectiveness in the context of the opposition teams' own tactics they came up against. The main focus is on the two seasons when they posted their record points totals: City in 2017/18 and 2018/19, and Liverpool in 2018/19 and 2019/20. As these two teams have continued to evolve their tactics and have bought and sold players since those seasons of unprecedented success, aspects of their tactics have changed; at the time of writing there have been notable differences to City's tactics in particular during certain periods. However, the overall framework and philosophy which forms the basis for the analysis has not changed. On occasions, goals scored by City and Liverpool during these seasons will be used to illustrate particular tactics. Unfortunately permission wasn't granted to use screenshots from Premier League games, but the goals described can be viewed on YouTube by searching for the games in which they occurred.

Glossary

Pockets (also known as half-spaces) – the spaces between the wings and the centre, and between the defensive and midfield lines.

For example, against a 4-4-2, the space between and behind the wide midfielder and central midfielder on each side of the pitch

Passing lane – space available to pass between player A and B, without an opposing player 'blocking' the line between the two players

Between the lines – the space between the midfield and defensive lines

‘Compact’ defensive shape – maintaining short distances between players both vertically and horizontally, in order to limit space and passing lanes between, for example, the defensive and midfield lines

High/mid/low block – where the opposition form their defensive shape; the space they protect, and the areas where they look to close down the opposition’s players. Low refers to the area of the pitch nearer their own goal

Transition to attack/defend – the phase of play which occurs following a turnover in possession, when a team changes from attacking to defending, or viceversa

High press – strategy to pressurise high up the pitch

Give and go (also known as a one-two or wall pass) – When player B receives a pass from player A and immediately returns the pass to player A

Second ball – the situation that occurs after the ball has been contested without a team gaining control of it. For example, after the defending team has headed away a cross, both teams compete to win the second ball

Counter-attack – when a team attacks immediately having won the ball back following a period of defending

Pivot(s) – deepest central midfielder(s), traditionally the link between defence and midfield, both with and without the ball

Number 8 – in a 4-3-3, the number 8s are the two central attacking midfielders, placed one each side between the pivot and the centre-forward

The channel – the space between full-back and centre-back, behind both players

Goal side – refers to the player nearest to the goal both vertically and horizontally, when one player is marking another

Position Labels in Figures

Liverpool and City Labels

GK = Goalkeeper

RB = Right-back (right full-back)

LB = Left-back (left full-back)

CB = Centre-back

P = Pivot

R8 = Right number 8

L8 = Left number 8

RW = Right-winger

LW = Left-winger

RF – Right-forward

LF – Left-forward

CF = Centre-forward

Opposition Labels

LM = Left midfielder

RM = Right midfielder

CM = Central midfielder

RWB = Right wing-back

LWB = Left wing-back