

Attacking playing styles in world football

Drs Raffaele Poli, Loïc Ravenel and Roger Besson

1. Introduction

The 84th CIES Football Observatory Monthly Report analyses the dialectic between positional and fast attacks using data collected by InStat. This company has now been acquired by the Hudl group, which also includes InStat's former main competitor [Wyscout](#). The data refers to the current season for 52 leagues with more than ten games played, and the last completed season for 23 additional ones. The analysis thus covers no less than 18,000 matches.

Positional attacks are defined by the indicator of the number of passes received by teammates in the opponent's third, while fast attacks are defined by the number of counter-attacks. According to InStat lexicon, counter-attacks define open play attacks carried out after recovering the ball from the defensive zone and making a quick transition to attack while the previous attacking team was in an offensive tactical position.

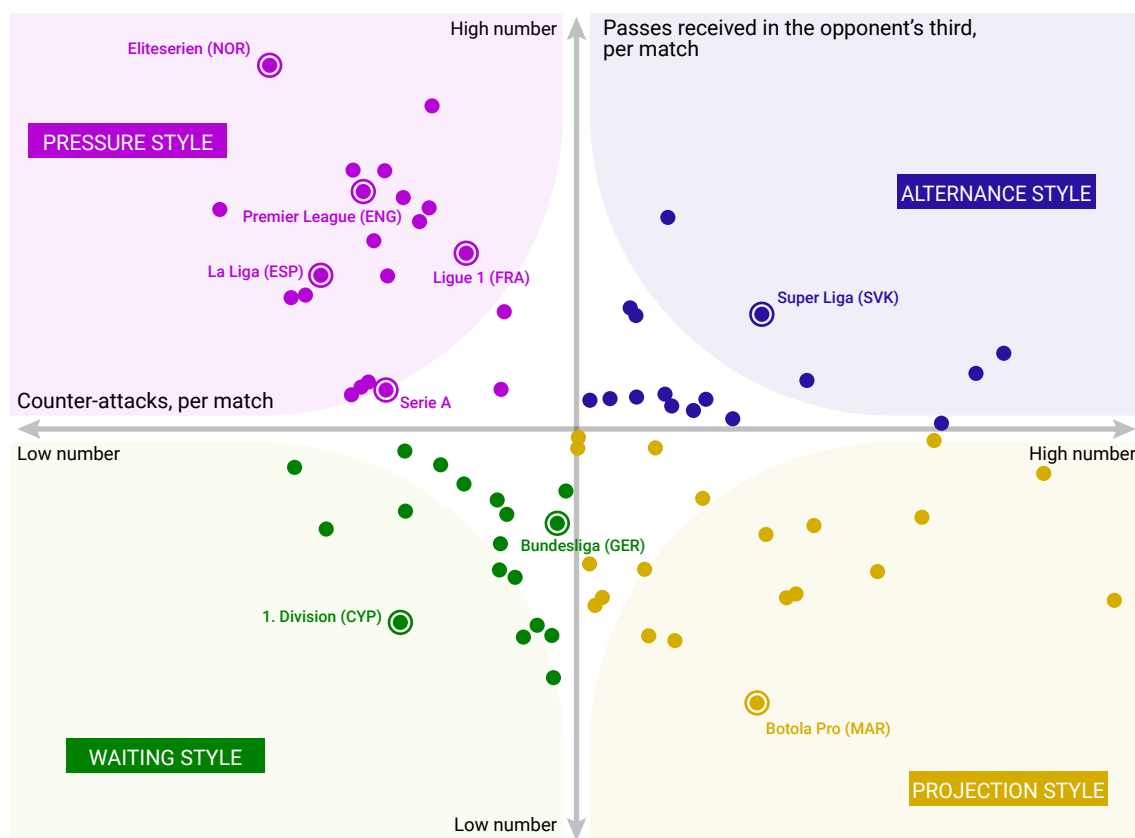
Figure 1: study sample

League	Season	Matches	League	Season	Matches	League	Season	Matches			
ARG	Primera División	2022	580	ESP	Primera División	2022/23	249	POL	Ekstraklasa	2022/23	216
ARG/2	Primera Nacional	2022	673	ESP/2	Segunda División	2022/23	340	POL/2	I Liga	2022/23	205
AUS	A-League Men	2022/23	114	FIN	Veikkausliiga	2022	162	POR	Primeira Liga	2022/23	215
AUT	Bundesliga	2022/23	126	FRA	Ligue 1	2022/23	269	POR/2	Segunda Liga	2022/23	211
AZE	Premyer Liqa	2022/23	127	FRA/2	Ligue 2	2022/23	268	QAT	Stars League	2022/23	90
BEL	Pro League	2022/23	259	GER	Bundesliga	2022/23	216	ROM	Liga I	2022/23	239
BLR	Premier League	2022	240	GER/2	2. Bundesliga	2022/23	215	RSA	PSL	2022/23	161
BOL	Primera División	2022	295	GER/3	3. Liga	2022/23	260	RUS	Premier League	2022/23	152
BRA	Brasileirão	2022	380	GRE	Super League 1	2022/23	181	SCO	Premiership	2022/23	168
BRA/2	Serie B	2022	379	HUN	NB I	2022/23	138	SCO/2	Championship	2022/23	129
BUL	First League	2022/23	183	ISR	Ligat Ha'al	2022/23	182	SRB	Super Liga	2022/23	206
CHI	Primera División	2022	237	ITA	Serie A	2022/23	260	SUI	Super League	2022/23	120
CHN	CSL	2022	298	ITA/2	Serie B	2022/23	288	SUI/2	Challenge League	2022/23	119
COL	Primera A	2022	418	JPN	J1 League	2022	306	SVK	Super Liga	2022/23	138
CRC	Primera División	2022/23	172	JPN/2	J2 League	2022	465	SVN	1. SNL	2022/23	129
CRO	HNL	2022/23	123	KAZ	Premier League	2022	181	SWE	Allsvenskan	2022	239
CYP	1. Division	2022/23	139	KOR	K League 1	2022	228	SWE/2	Superettan	2022	238
CZE	Czech Liga	2022/23	182	KSA	Saudi League	2022/23	158	THA	Thai League 1	2022/23	173
DEN	Superliga	2022/23	124	MAR	Botola Pro	2022/23	158	TUR	Süper Lig	2022/23	221
ECU	Liga Pro	2022	239	MEX	Liga MX	2022/23	267	TUR/2	1. Lig	2022/23	227
EGY	Premier League	2022/23	183	NED	Eredivisie	2022/23	224	UAE	Pro League	2022/23	133
ENG	Premier League	2022/23	261	NED/2	Eerste Divisie	2022/23	278	UKR	Premier League	2022/23	130
ENG/2	Championship	2022/23	431	NOR	Eliteserien	2022	238	URU	Primera División	2022	298
ENG/3	League One	2022/23	424	PAR	Division Profesional	2022	260	USA	MLS	2022	487
ENG/4	League Two	2022/23	419	PER	Primera División	2022	295	VEN	Primera División	2022	264

2. League analysis

The 75 leagues studied were divided into four quadrants (categories) according to the statistics recorded for the number of counter-attacks per match (horizontal axis) and the number of passes received by teammates in the opponent's third (vertical axis), as shown in Figure 2. The axes were placed at the all-league average of 13.9 for counter-attacks and 96.6 for passes received in the attacking zone.

Figure 2: attacking playing styles, per league



Pressure style

The top left quadrant is made up of 21 leagues whose teams have above-average statistics for passes received by teammates in the opponent's third and below-average statistics for counter-attacks. They are characterised by an offensive style of play built on collective "pressure". Four big-5 leagues fall into this category: the Premier League, the Liga, Serie A and the Ligue 1. Northern European leagues also tend to favour positional attacks over fast ones, as, outside Europe, do clubs from Australia, Brazil, Japan, South Korea and the USA.

Alternance style

The top right quadrant is made up of 16 leagues whose teams have above-average statistics for both counter-attacks and passes received in the opposition third. They are characterised by an attacking style of play that alternates between positional and fast attacks. No big-5 league falls into this category, in which we notably find the Belgian top flight, the Swiss first and second division, a number of Eastern European leagues (Hungary, Romania, Russia, Turkey, etc.), and only two non-European championships (Chile and South Africa).

Figure 3: "pressure" style leagues (from most to less typical)

	Counter-attacks			Passes in opponent third		
	/match	% to average		/match	% to average	
NOR	11.7	-15.8%	■	114	+18.2%	■
JPN/2	11.3	-18.4%	■	107	+11.0%	■
JPN	12.9	-7.4%	■	112	+16.2%	■
AUS	12.3	-11.5%	■	109	+13.0%	■
SWE	12.5	-9.9%	■	109	+13.0%	■
ENG	12.4	-11.0%	■	108	+11.9%	■
NED	12.7	-8.9%	■	108	+11.6%	■
ESP	12.1	-13.2%	■	104	+7.7%	■
FIN	11.9	-14.7%	■	103	+6.6%	■
DEN	12.4	-10.4%	■	106	+9.4%	■
KOR	12.0	-13.9%	■	103	+6.7%	■
SCO	12.8	-7.6%	■	107	+11.1%	■
SWE/2	12.8	-8.1%	■	107	+10.4%	■
USA	12.5	-9.7%	■	104	+7.7%	■
FRA	13.1	-5.7%	■	105	+8.8%	■
POL	12.4	-11.1%	■	99	+2.1%	■
UKR	12.4	-10.7%	■	99	+2.3%	■
ENG/2	12.3	-11.6%	■	98	+1.7%	■
ITA	12.5	-9.8%	■	99	+2.0%	■
BRA	13.4	-3.7%	■	102	+5.9%	■
ITA/2	13.4	-3.9%	■	99	+2.0%	■

Figure 4: "alternance" style leagues (from most to less typical)

	Counter-attacks			Passes in opponent third		
	/match	% to average		/match	% to average	
SCO/2	16.9	+22.0%	■	100	+3.8%	■
BLR	16.8	+20.5%	■	99	+2.8%	■
RUS	14.5	+4.7%	■	107	+10.6%	■
CHI	16.5	+18.8%	■	97	+0.3%	■
SVK	15.2	+9.5%	■	102	+5.8%	■
SUI/2	15.5	+11.8%	■	99	+2.4%	■
CZE	14.3	+2.8%	■	103	+6.1%	■
SUI	14.3	+3.1%	■	102	+5.7%	■
RSA	15.0	+8.0%	■	97	+0.5%	■
ROM	14.8	+6.6%	■	98	+1.5%	■
BEL	14.7	+6.0%	■	98	+0.9%	■
HUN	14.5	+4.6%	■	98	+1.8%	■
ENG/4	14.6	+4.9%	■	98	+1.1%	■
NED/2	14.3	+3.1%	■	98	+1.6%	■
TUR	14.1	+1.7%	■	98	+1.5%	■
ISR	14.0	+0.7%	■	98	+1.4%	■

Waiting style leagues

The bottom left quadrant is made up of 18 leagues whose teams have below-average statistics for both counter-attacks and passes received in the opposition third. Their attacking playing style can thus be defined as a “waiting” one. Among these leagues are the top two German divisions, with, however counter-attacking values very close to the average, the Portuguese first and second division, as well as several non-European leagues (China, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, etc.).

Projection style leagues

The bottom right quadrant is made up of 20 leagues whose teams have above-average statistics for counter-attacks and below-average statistics for passes received in the opposition third. They are characterised by a “projection” attacking style of play with an emphasis on quick attacks. Various Latin American leagues are included in this category, such as the top two Argentinean ones. The only European top division championships following a “projection” style are the Austrian, Croatian and Serbian ones.

Figure 5: “waiting” style leagues (from most to less typical)

	Counter-attacks			Passes in opponent third		
	/match	% to average		/match	% to average	
CYP	12.6	-9.1%	■	87	-9.7%	■
ESP/2	12.1	-12.9%	■	92	-5.0%	■
COL	13.7	-1.2%		85	-12.5%	■
QAT	13.5	-2.7%		87	-10.4%	■
CHN	11.9	-14.5%	■	95	-1.9%	
BUL	13.6	-2.0%		87	-9.8%	■
ECU	13.7	-1.3%		87	-10.4%	■
POR	12.7	-8.8%	■	93	-4.1%	
POR/2	13.3	-4.0%		90	-7.1%	■
THA	13.5	-3.2%		89	-7.4%	■
SVN	13.4	-3.9%		91	-5.8%	■
KSA	12.7	-8.8%	■	96	-1.1%	
POL/2	13.1	-5.8%	■	94	-2.8%	
UAE	13.4	-3.6%		93	-4.3%	■
GRE	12.9	-7.0%	■	95	-1.8%	
MEX	13.3	-4.1%		93	-3.6%	
GER/2	13.8	-1.0%		92	-4.7%	■
GER	13.8	-0.6%		94	-3.1%	

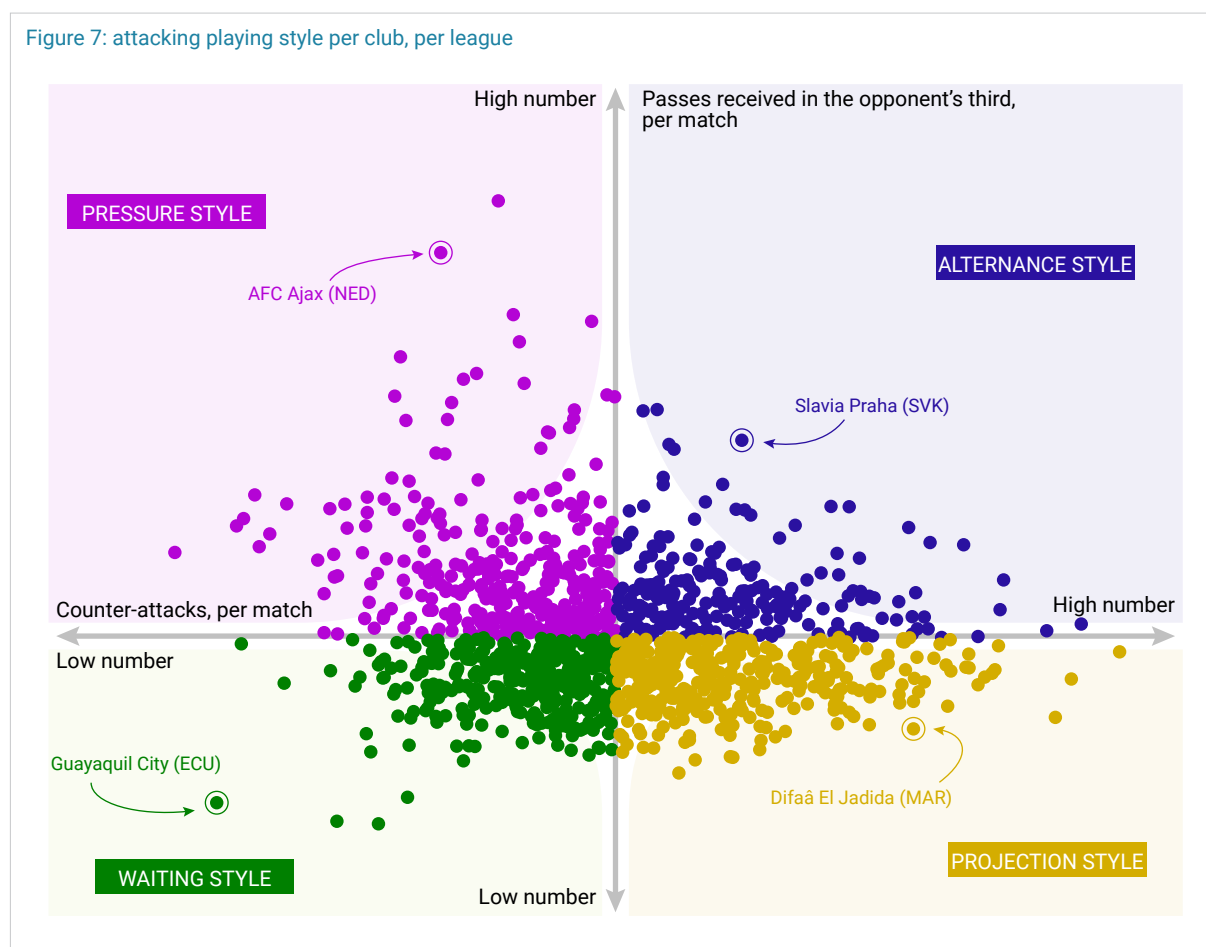
Figure 6: “projection” style leagues (from most to less typical)

	Counter-attacks			Passes in opponent third		
	/match	% to average		/match	% to average	
ARG/2	17.7	+27.7%	■	88	-8.6%	■
MAR	15.2	+9.3%	■	83	-13.8%	■
PAR	17.2	+24.0%	■	95	-2.2%	
ARG	16.0	+15.5%	■	90	-7.2%	■
URU	16.4	+17.8%	■	92	-4.4%	
AUT	15.5	+11.3%	■	89	-8.3%	■
GER/3	15.4	+10.8%	■	88	-8.5%	■
CRC	14.6	+5.1%	■	86	-10.6%	■
EGY	16.5	+18.4%	■	96	-0.6%	
KAZ	15.6	+12.2%	■	92	-4.8%	
BOL	14.4	+3.7%	■	87	-10.4%	■
VEN	15.2	+9.7%	■	92	-5.3%	■
CRO	14.4	+3.5%	■	90	-7.1%	■
TUR/2	14.0	+1.0%		88	-8.9%	■
FRA/2	14.1	+1.3%		89	-8.5%	■
PER	14.8	+6.5%	■	93	-3.5%	
BRA/2	14.0	+0.7%		90	-6.8%	■
SRB	14.5	+4.0%	■	96	-0.9%	
ENG/3	13.9	+0.1%		96	-1.0%	
AZE	13.9	+0.1%		96	-0.4%	

3. Club analysis

The analysis at league level has enabled us to classify them according to the offensive style of play practised. Nevertheless, the dominant style within a competition is not representative of all the participating clubs. The analysis by team according to the same method and categories formulated previously is thus particularly interesting in order to determine more precisely the attacking style of play of each club.

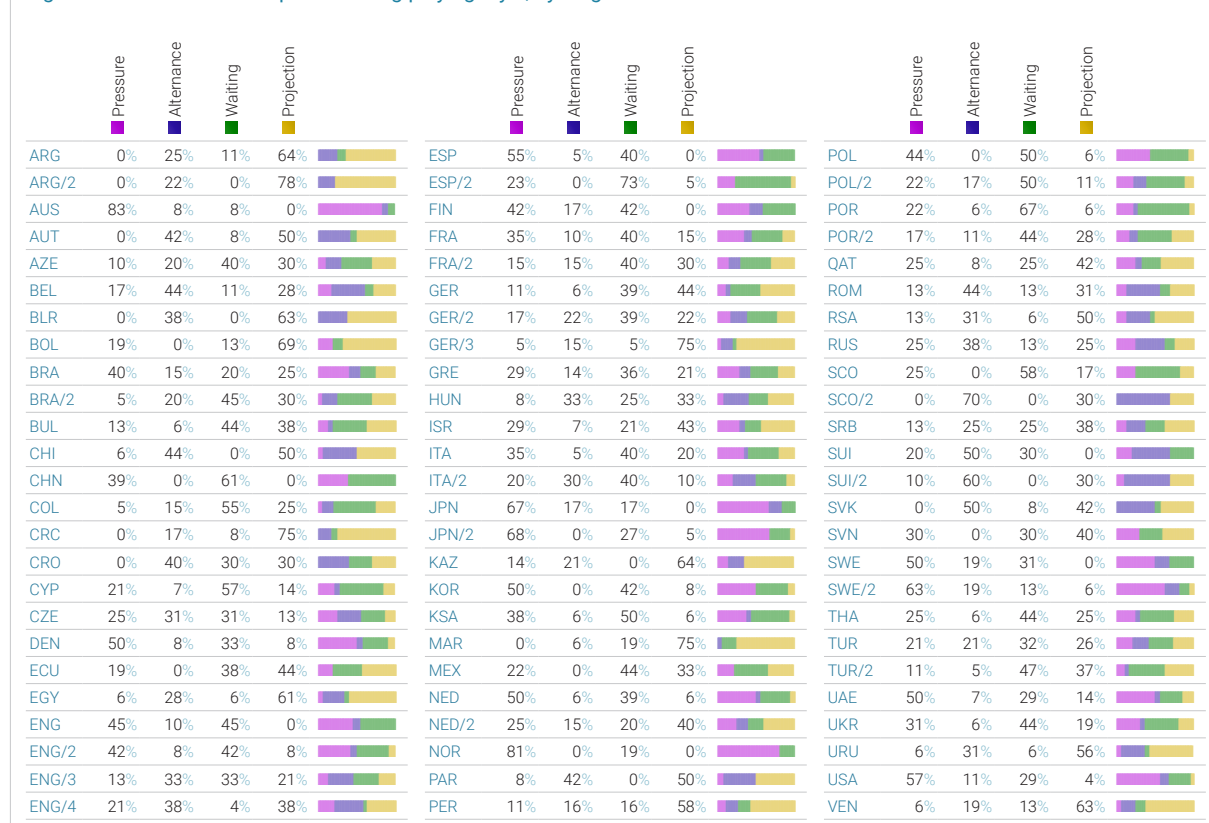
Figure 7: attacking playing style per club, per league



For example, “pressure” is the predominant attacking style in the Spanish Liga, but only eleven of the 20 teams fall into this category, including Barcelona, Real Madrid and Atlético de Madrid. One team, Athletic Club, alternates positional and quick attacks, eight clubs fall into the “waiting” category, while none into the “projection” one.

In the English Premier League, nine out of 20 clubs fall into the “pressure” category, including all the dominant teams except Liverpool, which has an “alternance” attacking style of play, as does Leeds United. Nine clubs are in the “waiting” category, while, as in Spain, none are in the “projection” one. Of the 15 teams in the big-5 that favour a “projection” offensive style, eight are from the Bundesliga, four from Serie A and three from Ligue 1.

Figure 8: team distribution per attacking playing style, by league



4. Conclusion

By combining the data on the number of counter-attacks and the number of passes received in the opponent's third, it is possible to distinguish different offensive styles of play. We were thus able to establish four main categories: the "pressure" style favouring positional attacks, the "alternance" style mixing positional and fast ones, the "waiting" style with below-average values for the two offensive indicators, as well as the "projection" style favouring quick attacks.

Analysis by league shows that four of the five big-5 championships fall into the "pressure" category: the English Premier League, the Spanish Liga, the Italian Serie A and the French Ligue 1. The German Bundesliga is in the "waiting" category, but with counter-attacking values very close to the average, which could have moved it into the "projection" style, alongside many Latin American leagues, including the top two Argentinean divisions.

The league-wide analysis identifies a dominant attacking style of play, but this style is not representative of all participating clubs. The team analysis thus allows for a more precise definition of the offensive tactical options adopted by individual clubs. Although to different degrees, the majority of the most competitive teams adopt a "pressure" offensive style. However, there are exceptions such as Liverpool and Borussia Dortmund who fall into the "alternance" category, Roma and Juventus adopting a "waiting" style or Milan and Eintracht practising a "projection" one.

Finally, we would like to thank the people at InStat for having facilitated access to their data and having understood the meaning of our approach and our mission to push back the frontiers of knowledge in the service of the sustainable development of football around the world. We are sure that our many regular readers will join us in thanking them.