

Game Management in Soccer

Game management in soccer can be defined as a team's ability to recognize important phases and adapt to changing circumstances which play out through the course of a match.

Teams must learn the skill of *game management* in order to maintain advantage in all moments of the game, thus increasing their chances of ultimately getting the result they desire. Managing the game involves tactics, formation, and principles of play, but also includes less tangible elements such as mentality, maturity, awareness, composure, and savviness. Some game management can be planned in advance based on predictable trends of the game or knowledge of the opponent. However, most often a team's game management skills are tested as circumstances develop and adaptation is required throughout the course of each unique match. Teams proficient in managing games will understand how to effectively see out a game they are leading late on, how to cope with a hostile playing environment, or how to respond should they go down a player due to red card. Above all, game management is a mentality which seeks to gain advantage over the opposition in all the evolving moments of the game in order to achieve the desired final result.

A team's preparedness for predictable **phases** and responsiveness to evolving **circumstances** will determine their effectiveness at managing the game.

Phase: *First Five Minutes of Each Half*

Goals are often scored early in each half when teams are not yet organized or switched on.

- ✓ Defensively, teams can manage this time period by taking a safe approach. Teams often "hunt" the ball by pressuring over the entire field and the team under pressure can overplay in the back and give the ball away. To be safe, teams can instead play long to relieve pressure and bypass as many pressuring players as possible. This forces the hunting team to face their own goal and ensures that the team under pressure does not give away shots or goals in the opening minutes.
- ✓ Offensively, a team may manage this time period by taking an aggressive approach by pressuring the opposition as high on the field as possible to force turnovers and early goal scoring opportunities.
- ✓ A team may choose to play low pressure with an established line of confrontation for the opening minutes so as to feel out the opposition's tactics until it can be determined that full field pressure can be applied.

Phase: *Last Five Minutes of Each Half*

Goals are often scored during this time when physical and mental fatigue sets in.

- ✓ Defensively, teams may adapt a conservative approach in these final moments in order to tighten things up and see out the half without conceding a goal. This can include minimizing

the number of players sent forward, keeping numbers behind the ball and staying compact when not in possession.

- ✓ Offensively, teams may continue to press aggressively for a goal in anticipation that the opposition may be switching off or suffering fatigue.

Phase: *Dead ball Situations*

It is widely known that many goals are scored through dead ball situations - i.e. throw-ins, corner kicks, and free kicks - when play is stopped and the attacking team takes advantage or the defensive team switches off.

- ✓ Understanding this important trend in the game, teams can manage dead ball moments by being more switched on to maintain alertness. Heightened urgency during dead ball moments can lead to quick or clever attacking opportunities and helps to remain vigilant defensively to deny opportunities.
- ✓ Teams can also make a concerted effort to minimize the number of fouls committed in their defensive half to limit the number of dangerous dead ball opportunities they afford the opposition.

Phase: *Moments Following a Goal Scored*

Goals are often scored in quick succession with one goal occurring right after another was scored.

- ✓ A team which has just scored can manage the phase immediately after the goal by pressuring to win the ball back as quickly as possible and then assertively attacking the opposition. Often the team which has been scored upon is still in disarray and is therefore susceptible to another attacking move. Even if a successive goal isn't immediately scored, by virtue of immediately working to win the ball back in order to attack, the team that just scored ensures that it will not fall victim to the complacency which often occurs after scoring a goal.
- ✓ A team that has just conceded a goal can manage the phase immediately after the goal by assertively attacking the opposition as the team which has scored often can be complacent after their goal. The scoring team is therefore vulnerable if it switches off after scoring. Even if the conceding team does not score immediately they send the message that they are back in the game and will not back down because of the goal.

Circumstance: *Leading Late in the Game*

Teams leading at the later stages of the game can "kill the game off" through efforts to dictate play in their favor and run out the clock.

- ✓ Ways to manage the game while leading late include:
 - possessing the ball and moving it by passing
 - opting to play safe possession passes rather than risky penetrating passes
 - playing to the corners of the attacking end of the field to hold the ball up or draw corner kicks

- playing along the sidelines to draw throw-ins
- taking your time on throws and allowing a better suited player to come take it
- taking full allotted time to get the team up field and compact before putting free kicks back in play
- playing short corners and free kicks to feet to possess which minimizes turn-overs and counter attacks
- goalkeepers taking full allotted time for goal kicks and punts
- substitute players exiting the field no faster than they have to

Circumstance: *Trailing Late in the Game*

Teams trailing at the later stages of the game need to maximize the amount of playing time left by playing with purpose and possibly more directness.

- ✓ Ways to manage the game while trailing late include:
 - taking throw-ins quickly
 - organizing free kicks quickly
 - avoiding committing fouls which allow the opposition to kill time
 - committing more players forward
 - playing more directly
 - returning the ball to the center circle after scoring
- ✓ Managing the game when trailing also requires knowing when you have ample time to stick to your tactical plan vs when little time is left and more direct play must be used. Often teams abandon their tactical plan and begin playing direct too early, when in actuality there is ample time to stick with their original plan to press for the needed goal.

Circumstance: *Leading by Two Goals*

Teams leading by two goals can fall victim to the supposed “most dangerous lead” because the two goals can give a false sense of security. One goal conceded cuts the lead in half which typically gives the trailing team renewed energy and spirit.

- ✓ Teams with a two goal advantage should patiently but purposefully pursue the decisive third goal to effectively put the game out of reach. While they should pursue the “killer blow” they are not obligated to over commit numbers forward or leave themselves vulnerable in the back. Inevitably the trailing team must commit numbers forward to try to cut the lead and this will open up spaces for the leading team to exploit. Managing this scenario is a delicate balance which requires patience to not over-commit but also decisiveness in seeking out the third goal when it’s on to go forward.

Circumstance: *Playing “Up a Man”*

Teams can find themselves playing with more players than the opposition due to red card or injury.

- ✓ Offensively the team that’s up a man can manage this scenario in possession by moving the ball quickly and spreading the field in order to take advantage of the numerical superiority

and open spaces. While the team that's up should not feel the need to play frantically, they should feel inclined to push the pace of the game to take advantage of attacking spaces that exist. Pushing the pace also requires more work out of the opposition who is already challenged to work enough to cope with the player disadvantage. A slower game favors the team that's down a man, so the team that's up should manage the game by pushing the pace.

- ✓ Defensively the team that's up a man can often afford to put numbers around the ball and double team the ball carrier in order to win back possession as soon as possible.
- ✓ Should the team that's down a man switch formations by playing with fewer attackers, the team that's up a man may have the luxury of using a formation with fewer defenders and more attackers.

Circumstance: *Playing "Down a Man"*

Teams can find themselves playing with fewer players than the opposition due to red card or injury.

- ✓ Defensively, the team that's down a man can manage this scenario by remaining compact and cohesive, with numbers behind the ball, so as to minimize passing lanes and space for the opposition to exploit. This typically requires a change in formation. The degree to which this team commits itself forward in the attack will have a direct effect on its ability to stay compact defensively. Therefore, a more conservative offensive approach is often adapted. A higher degree of work rate is required of each player on a team that is down a man and much of this boils down to mentality.
- ✓ Offensively, teams playing with fewer players than the opposition can manage this scenario by adopting a different formation which allows them to stay compact so as to provide support and passing options. Quick transition into offense is important as counter attacking is often the primary means of attack.
- ✓ Special attention should be given to taking full advantage of offensive dead ball situations. Free kicks are especially valuable opportunities to create scoring chances for a team that is down a player.

Circumstance: *Pursuing a Necessary Result*

In tournament and league play teams often find themselves knowing prior to a match that a particular result or score line is required or desired.

- ✓ When a team knows it must win it may manage the game as a whole with a more attack-minded approach and even more so if a particular goal difference is required. This requires not only appropriate tactics but a corresponding mentality and spirit.
- ✓ Conversely, teams sometimes find themselves needing only a draw or even to lose by no more than a certain amount. In these instances the team would know that the pressure is on the opposition to be the more enterprising team. This team could therefore manage the game by adopting a conservative approach, both defensively and offensively, to ensure that they remain organized defensively and don't become too spread out by over-committing to

attack. They manage the game by staying organized and forcing the opposition to beat them straight up.

Circumstance: *Adverse Weather Conditions*

Teams may encounter adverse weather conditions which require adaptation and management.

- ✓ Playing in extreme wind may require management with more ground passing while extreme heat may require conservation of energy and minimization of playing long balls into space. Playing in extremely wet conditions may require a “safety first” approach in the back with more first time clearances to manage the high risk of error in the back.

Circumstance: *Imposing or Hostile Playing Environment*

The environment at a playing venue may present challenges due to the close proximity and/or hostility of spectators.

- ✓ Teams can manage a hostile environment through strict discipline to tune out specific taunts or comments from spectators. Players should focus on the game itself and should collectively support one another on the field to keep confidence and spirit high. Team unity and individual mental focus are especially important to manage these conditions.
- ✓ Playing conditions can be imposing due to the opposition’s physical play and intent to commit fouls and/or verbal insults. Teams can manage these conditions through strict discipline to refrain from retaliation and through moving the ball quickly so as to not invite unnecessary challenges. Again team unity and individual mental focus are important to manage these conditions.
- ✓ The extreme altitude of a playing venue may present physiological challenges to players who are not acclimated. Teams can manage this by adapting an tactics which minimize, to a realistic degree, the amount of running required (i.e. low pressure and counter attacking, high pressing only intermittently, playing patient build up instead of long and direct, etc.). Utilization of substitutes also plays an important part in managing this circumstance.