

Adam Metelski¹ 

The COVID-19 Lockdown and Players' Match Statistics in Serie A

¹ Poznan University of Economics and Business, Poznan, Poland

Abstract

Purpose: In March 2020, most sports competitions around the world were suspended, ended, or canceled. As a result of the COVID-19 lockdown, citizens and athletes from many countries had to stay at home. It was a very unusual break for athletes and it caused a lot of discussion how it could affect the performance of professional players. This study aims to check how the lockdown due to COVID-19 affected the players' match statistics in the premier Italian football league – Serie A. The Italian league was chosen deliberately because this country was particularly hard hit by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach: Five-fixtured rounds played after the restart (since 20th June 2020) of the 2019/2020 season were analyzed and compared with the five-fixtured rounds immediately preceding the lockdown (played in February and March). In this way, it was possible to check whether the break in the games and training had significant impact in the initial period after return to play.

Findings: The results indicate that the players, in general, managed to stay in good overall shape during the lockdown, but when competition resumed, they attempted much fewer dribbles and tackles.

Research and practical limitations/implications: The research focuses on the Italian league. The influence of Covid-19 on sport and society varied from country to country. As a result, lockdown in particular regions could have had different impacts.

Originality/value: The value of the study is a description of the significance of a not-expected break in competition and training for the statistics of football players and thus the quality of football games.

Keywords: football players, match statistics, Serie A, COVID-19 lockdown

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously affected the sports industry (European Commission, 2020). In March 2020, most of the world's sports events were suspended, ended, or cancelled due to COVID-19 (Zucker, 2020). It was connected with huge financial losses of sports clubs. The European Club Association (ECA, 2020) has estimated the losses of European football clubs at approximately 3.6 billion EURO. The COVID-19 crisis has had by far the greatest impact on matchday direct revenue, as stadiums have been closed to fans or could be only partially filled. The COVID-19 situation in sport, and its uniqueness, has also led many scientists to study the topic (Cordovil et al., 2021; Metelski & Kornakov, 2021; Mozolev et al., 2020; Szczepkowski, 2021; Ważny, 2021).

¹ Adam Metelski PhD, e-mail: adam.metelski@ue.poznan.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-1016-7579

During the lockdown and suspension of sports competitions, professional football players had to stay at home and usual team practice was not an option. There was a lot of discussion among fans and experts about the possible impact of the lockdown on the players and the overall quality of matches following a return to play. It was assumed that the inability to train together as a team during the lockdown due to COVID-19 could impact the players' performances. Research shows that 8-week detraining rapidly results in declines in athletic performance (Liao et al., 2016). It is worth considering what factors affect player performance. It has to be stated that player performance is dependent on many factors, including match importance, score, location, opposition, number of recovery days and the employed tactical system (Paul et al., 2015).

There are quite a few statistics used in football and many experts are still working on developing new ones that will help coaches and managers to run the team better and through this to win more games (Kuper & Szymanski, 2014). The goal is to create a system as useful in football as was introduced in baseball (Lewis, 2003). The main statistic and the ultimate determinant of success in football are goals (which a team has to score more than their opponent to win a game). The remaining statistics are sometimes interpreted differently, for example, to score a goal a team has to possess the ball, and yet the interpretation of this indicator is ambiguous (Jones et al., 2004). Another good example is that sometimes a very good statistical result does not determine the score of the game. Thus, a team can lose even after a good statistical performance (i.e. high numbers of shots, etc.) or win after a bad performance (i.e. only one shot) (Paul et al., 2015). Statistics in sport undoubtedly have their economic dimension, because it is usually based on statistics that the values of players are assessed, which is directly related to the level of their remuneration (Metelski, 2015, 2021).

In this research, match statistics from the top Italian football league – Serie A, were analyzed. Serie A comprises 20 teams and is one of the best football leagues in the world (Deloitte, 2021; Poli et al., 2020; UEFA, 2020). The most recognizable clubs of Serie A include: Inter Milan, Juventus FC, SSC Napoli, AS Roma, SS Lazio, ACF Fiorentina and AC Milan. The Italian league was chosen because Italy as a country was hit very hard by COVID-19 at the start of this pandemic (Ceylan, 2020; Giovannini & Mosca, 2021; Megna, 2020). The very difficult situation in Italy also affected footballers and some of them had their salaries significantly reduced during the pandemic, for example, Cristiano Ronaldo agreed to sacrifice 3.8 million euros of his yearly salary to ease the financial burden on his club – Juventus FC (ESPN, 2020). It is also worth adding that Cristiano Ronaldo, who plays in the Italian league, is one of the best footballers in the world, and also the most popular sportsman in the world in social media in terms of the number of followers (especially on Instagram) (Leszczyński & Metelski, 2021). The purpose of the article is to describe the effect of the lockdown due to COVID-19 on players' match statistics based on Serie A.

2. Material & Methods

The match statistics used in this study were obtained from the professional football website – WhoScored.com. Five fixture rounds played after the restart (since 20th June 2020) of the 2019/20 season were analyzed and compared with the five fixture rounds immediately preceding the lockdown (played in February and March). The main goal of the research was to check if the lockdown resulted in any changes to the players' match statistics in the initial period after the end of the lockdown. As previously stated, during the lockdown,

the players could not practice as a team, so it could have affected their match form. However, with each match after the resumption of league play, players should have been able to progressively get back to their normal match shape. Therefore, this research focuses only on the first five fixture rounds after the return, when the effects of a break in the competition should not have been most visible.

The study focused on the following football statistics: shots, fouls, aerial duels, passes, dribbles and tackles. The study also shows which teams, after a return to play, had the greatest increases, and which had the greatest decreases in the case of the above-mentioned statistics. Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics 26 were used to process the quantitative data of the research.

3. Results

Generally, the average statistics of the players before and after the lockdown due to COVID-19 are at a similar level, but there are a few interesting differences. Namely, the footballers attempted fewer dribbles than they did before. The difference for all the analyzed teams was 3.46 fewer dribbles a game, which is statistically significant as shown by a Student's t-test for independent samples: $t(142) = 2.85$; $p = 0.005$. It is worth noting that, as the average number of dribbles decreased, their rate of success increased by more than one pp. Another interesting fact is that players attempted almost 3 tackles a game less after a return to play. This result also is statistically significant as shown by a Student's t-test for independent samples: $t(198) = 2.86$; $p = 0.005$. In the case of tackles attempted, however, their smaller number did not affect their rate of success, as it fell by almost 3 pp. Other results that are worth paying attention to are the lower number of shots after a return to play (on average 0.53 shots less per game), as well as the lower number of passes between players (5.46 passes less). Interestingly, after a return to play, the players started to foul slightly more often (0.23 more fouls per game). All analyzed data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of players' statistics before and after lockdown due to COVID-19 for Serie A teams

Statistic per match	Pre-lockdown	Post-lockdown
Shots	14.22	13.69
Fouls	13.80	14.03
Aerial duels won	14.48	14.44
Passes attempted	456.00	450.55
Successful passes (%)	81.24	81.71
Dribbles attempted	17.79	14.33
Successful dribbles (%)	61.81	62.96
Tackles attempted	24.77	21.96
Successful tackles (%)	59.67	59.07

Source: own elaboration.

The study also determined which Serie A teams improved their stats the most after a return to play and which worsened the most. Table 2 shows the greatest increases and the greatest decreases among Serie A teams. There are some interesting differences, namely the Parma Calcio 1913 team, after a return to play, saw a substantial increase in

successful dribbles (14.6 pp) and successful tackles (11.2 pp). AC Milan is also worth mentioning, with the average number of passes per game increasing by 98.4. In turn, the multiple Italian champions and the best Italian team in recent years – Juventus FC, after a return to play, began to play more aggressively, as their average number of tackles attempted increased by 3.6.

Table 2. Clubs that statistics improved or worsened the most after the lockdown due to COVID-19

Teams that reported the greatest increases			
Statistic per match	Club	Value pre-lockdown	Value post-lockdown
Shots	FC Internazionale Milano	15.0	19.4
Fouls	Brescia Calcio	11.0	15.6
Aerial duels won	Atalanta Bergamasca Calcio	13.0	21.0
Passes attempted	AC Milan	468.8	567.2
Successful passes (%)	ACF Fiorentina	75.2	84.4
Dribbles attempted	UC Sampdoria	9.0	14.4
Successful dribbles (%)	Parma Calcio 1913	53.0	67.6
Tackles attempted	Juventus FC	21.2	24.8
Successful tackles (%)	Parma Calcio 1913	51.6	62.8
The teams that saw the biggest drops			
Statistic per match	Club	Value pre-lockdown	Value post-lockdown
Shots	Udinese Calcio	15.8	10.4
Fouls	SPAL	19.0	13.4
Aerial duels won	AC Milan	22.0	10.4
Passes attempted	Bologna FC 1909	481.4	386.4
Successful passes (%)	Hellas Verona FC	78.0	64.2
Dribbles attempted	AC Milan	27.6	12.8
Successful dribbles (%)	AS Roma	71.0	56.6
Tackles attempted	UC Sampdoria	30.6	22.8
Successful tackles (%)	Torino FC	65.2	49.4

Source: own elaboration.

Among the teams that recorded statistical declines, it is worth paying attention to Hellas Verona FC, because the percentage of successful passes of this team fell by 13.8 pp. After returning to play, some teams also began to play less offensively, the best example of which is Udinese Calcio – their average number of shots fell by 5.4. Some teams also started to play more cautiously, as shown by a much lower average number of fouls, as was the case with SPAL, whose average number of fouls per game fell by 5.6.

4. Discussion

The study compared the players' statistics from five pre-lockdown fixture rounds with the five-fixture rounds played immediately after the resumption of the competition. Many fans and experts wondered how such an unusual break and the inability to train together as a team would affect the players. The results of the study show that players' statistics have

generally remained at a similar level, but it has to be stated that a few interesting differences could be noted.

The first observation is that after a return to play, the players attempted much fewer dribbles and tackles (both differences are statistically significant, $p < 0.05$). These results can be interpreted by that when players returned to play, they began to play more cautiously. Dribbling requires a lot of technical skills, and during the lockdown, players were not able to practice this type of play. It is worth noting that as the number of dribbles attempted decreased, their effectiveness increased slightly. Therefore, it can be said that the players less frequently but more wisely made the decision to start to dribble. Fewer dribbles may also correlate with fewer tackles. Additionally, the decrease in the average number of tackles attempted per game after a return to play could also be explained by the increased caution of the players. Tackles almost always involve contact, either between the players directly or with the ball between them. Tackles usually are aggressive and are the main reason for injuries in football – making up 50% of all the injuries (Geier, 2020). Perhaps athletes, in a country so severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, have consciously or unconsciously started to respect their health and that of their opponents more – and thus possibly they attempted far fewer tackles.

The other results worth paying attention to is the fact that the Serie A players started to take fewer shots per match (0.53 less), and they started exchanging fewer passes (5.46 fewer passes), but these differences did not turn out to be statistically significant. On the other hand, the average number of fouls per game increased (0.23 fouls more) and the percentage of successful passes increased (by 0.47 pp), but these differences did not turn out to be statistically significant either. To sum up, it can be said that, with the exception of two statistics (dribbles and tackles), they remained at a similar level – which clearly indicates that the players were able to properly take care of their physical condition during the break in competition.

5. Conclusions

The situation in March 2020 was a unique event in the world of sport because earlier in sports history events were suspended or canceled only as a result of wars or serious political crises. Preventing the normal training of players in team sports could undoubtedly have an impact on their match form. The purpose of this study was to find out if the lockdown due to COVID-19 had an impact on players' match statistics when they returned to play. Five-fixture rounds played before lockdown were compared with five-fixture rounds played right after a return to play. During these first few rounds played immediately after a return to play, the possible impact of a break in the competition should have been most visible, as it can be assumed, that players should return to their usual form with each subsequent match.

The results of the research indicate that the overall statistics remained at a similar level, but the players after returning to play began to attempt much fewer dribbles and tackles. This can be explained by the fact that dribbling requires a lot of technical skills that the athletes could not work on during the break. In turn, the lower number of tackles might be explained by them being more careful and taking more care of their health and the health of their opponents. Perhaps one of the reason for this was the very difficult situation of the healthcare system in Italy at that time. In subsequent studies, it would be worth comparing how such an unusual break in the competition and the inability to train normally affected players in different countries, more or less affected by COVID-19. This

type of study would allow general conclusions to be drawn about the break in the competitions on player statistics, and thus on the quality of sports competitions.

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