
How to Bend the Rules Like Beckham



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The risks professional footballers take as they flirt with foul play hold lessons - positive and negative - for high-stakes competitors in every arena.

In hard-fought competitions, compliance with rules can be quite nuanced. It is possible - especially for those who know a game well - to play “by the book” while utterly subverting its spirit. Flirting with prohibition in this way carries a great deal of risk, however. Going slightly too far could elicit harsh punishment. Moreover, if rule-benders become too bold, authorities may eventually start closing loopholes or tightening oversight.

To explore “legal cheating” and its ramifications, my recent research looks at behaviours in professional football that exist in a regulatory grey zone: fouls and deliberate time-wasting. Both are very often not what they seem. Fouling, or aggressive play (e.g. kicking, pushing or tackling an opponent), is a violation of the rules that grants a free kick to the club on the receiving end. It can also result in the offender being ejected from the game. But this ostensibly rash, desperate move often has the strategic benefit of stopping a striker in their tracks before they can take prime scoring position. My new

paper in [Organization Studies](#) (co-authored by Nils Rudi of Yale School of Management and Anup Walvekar of National University of Singapore) sifts the rational and irrational motivations behind fouling.

A [separate paper in PLOS ONE](#) (with the same co-authors) focuses on how footballers run out the clock in defence of a lead or tie. Football affords more leeway for strategic time-wasting than most other professional sports, because the clock keeps running when play is stopped for events such as throw-ins, fouls and player substitutions. Although deliberately delaying resumption of play is against the rules, fans and football leagues are well aware that players exhibit markedly less hustle when they're pleased with the state of the scoreboard. Our paper quantifies the amount of gameplay lost and explores some of the players' favourite time-wasting techniques.

Dataset

For both papers, we used data from Amisco-Prozone, a performance analysis provider for many professional football leagues. The dataset covers several seasons of competitive play within one of Europe's top all-male leagues – totalling 1,492 matches in the case of the fouling study; 2,231 matches for the time-wasting study. We were able to track exact player positions on the field, in 0.1-second increments, as well as performance events such as fumbles, touches, catches and saves. On average, the dataset lists 2,557 events per match – that's one event per every 2.4 seconds of game time.

Fouling

Despite the fast pace and high drama of the sport, fouling is largely a matter of cold calculation, we found. This was made plain when we ran statistical comparisons between situationally similar moments across various matches that included a foul, and those that did not. Across the dataset, there was a strong correlation between the likelihood of scoring (in the non-foul condition) and the incidence of fouling.

What sets world-class footballers apart, then, may be more than their physical strength and speed. They seem to possess an internal calculator capable of almost instantly determining whether, for example, an opponent's angle of attack towards the goal is dangerous enough to justify the risk involved in fouling. This sort of strategic agility is difficult to teach; it can only come from years of diligent practice and habitual exposure to top-level competition.

That said, there were two situations in which the likelihood of fouling exceeded what was strictly rational. As suggested by the academic research on **prospect theory**, which studies the impact of “loss framing” upon decision making, players were 12 percent more likely to commit fouls when their team was in the lead (i.e. they had something to lose). Players who had just been robbed of the ball were 67 percent more likely to resort to fouling their opponent (which we call the “hothead effect” in the paper). The most conducive conditions for fouling were when a recently ball-deprived player was able to catch up to the player who took the ball from him. In those cases, we saw a 132 percent increase in the likelihood of a foul occurring – a pattern that we call the “red hothead effect”.

Overall, our findings suggest that however rowdy and impulsive their behaviour may be off the field, football stars are consummate professionals. In this case, that means they will make a rational choice to violate the rules if it serves their purposes. Still, they are only human – and, like all of us, the quality of their decision making declines when the prospect of loss enters the picture.

Consequently, the rule against fouling, intended to protect footballers’ physical safety, loses its force when the strategic benefit of breaking it exceeds possible punishment – or when competitive instinct overtakes players’ rationality.

Time-wasting

We suspected that, similar to fouling, time-wasting in football is anything but random. To test our hypothesis, we derived a measure of value for every minute of a match, reflecting how much each team stood to gain or lose from hoarding that minute. For a superior team only one point behind, the value would be negative – they would want to restart the play as soon as possible to maximise their chances of scoring and winning. There would be equally strong positive value for the weaker team in wasting that minute, or even a few seconds of it, in order to cling to their unlikely lead.

Our value-per-minute estimates aligned very closely with the actual amounts of time spent in substitutions, free kicks, corner kicks, etc. On average, one standard deviation in value-per-minute corresponded to approximately two seconds of goal kick delay – a pause perhaps too short for the referee to punish, but long enough to be noticed. Longer delays were tied to events players could more easily milk for extra precious seconds, e.g. free kicks

after a foul, which can be lengthened by an affected limp or exaggerated struggle when rising from the ground.

Depending on the team pairing under consideration, these time-wasting tactics may result in up to five minutes of lost gameplay per match. Since an average match involves only 59 minutes of total gameplay, time-wasting represents a significant value drain for fans of the league we studied. Assuming the numbers are similar for the sport globally, the potential losses for football as a whole are staggering. It's no wonder, then, that the international football association FIFA and the governance body IFAB are considering changing the rules to stop the clock when the ball is out of play.

It is not as though doing so would automatically speed up the action across the board, because the current rules incentivise teams to pick up the pace when value-per-minute is negative, as much as to strategically delay when it is positive. All told, though, our analysis forecasts that the increase in gameplay quality produced by the proposed rule change would equal one additional goal for every 11 games.

Implications for competitors

As we've seen, both fouling and time-wasting are recognised as a blot on fair play and the competitive integrity of the sport. Yet only time-wasting seems to have drawn the authorities' attention. Could the reason have something to do with the perceived value for the spectator? In dribs and drabs, time-wasting leeches suspense and momentum from matches, negatively affecting the fans' experience. On the other hand, physical confrontations can bring entire stadiums to their feet. A cynical interpretation of the above might be that professional soccer cares more about providing excitement to its audience than the health and safety of players.

The lessons here apply outside soccer too. Business competitors would do well to keep in mind that the cheats they adopt to gain advantage for themselves or their organisations can clash with higher-level goals, such as keeping prized customers engaged. For their part, managers should be wary of stoking their team's competitive passions to the point that employees would gladly bend or break rules in order to win, especially when loss framing is introduced to raise the stakes. Motivation should be carefully leavened by caution to ensure that cooler heads prevail.

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