

THE ART OF SPYING (I)

One of the most challenging tasks in football is the scouting. There are basically two types. One is to watch the opposing teams to know what they do and being able to counter it the day we play against them. The second, is about players. I will talk about the first, and I'll leave the second for an upcoming entry.

Today there are many applications that allow us to analyze a game and do a quick summary taking those plays that interest us. Even include word processing that allow a good presentation of the game in question, and that players know what they are going to "find" in this game.

This, however, has two problems. The first is that such programs are often expensive and not all the clubs can afford them. The second is that in lower categories and minor league games may not be recorded and, therefore, this is where involved, very directly, the work of the scout.

What are the steps to follow? What should we show our coach? What I'll put now is just a model.

- 1) Data of match: Teams, day, hour, competition (League, Cup, European Competition, etc.), weather conditions (temperature, rain or shine, wind, etc.) and pitch (short grass, high, artificial. Wet, dry, muddy). Spectator attendance and types thereof (Silent, babbling, respectful, aggressive, etc.).
- 2) Lineups and substitutions. Minutes and reasons (injury, fatigue, tactical substitution)
- 3) Systems (formations) used, with variants (because injuries, expulsions, substitutions, substitutions of opponents, etc., and when they have been applied)
- 4) Analysis of the team when attacking. Combinative, direct. Building up from the back. With long kick from goalkeeper or a defender. Short or long combinations. Use of the wingers or full-backs. Striker static or mobile. Crosses. Their types. Second plays. Movements to create spaces. Key players in the building of the play. Positioning of the team at the end of play.
- 5) Analysis of the team when defensive transition. Type of transition. With attempt to recover the ball once it is lost or not. If the attempt, which players and how it is done, and how the rest of the team retrieve. If not done, how is the retrieve of the team after the loss.
- 6) Analysis of the team when defending. Zonal, individual, mixed, combined. Gap between lines. Which players follow to who. Who never follows. How they close the pitch. How they pressure the ball holder. In which (flanks, center) areas?. Support.

7) Analysis of the team when offensive transition. Going out safety. Going out long. By the flanks. By the middle. How many players. What they do those who do not participate.

8) Analysis of lines and players: Goalkeeper. Defenders. Midfielders. Forwards. Reserves. Strengths and weaknesses. High balls. Ground balls. Short or long spaces.

9) Set-pieces. Kickoff, throw-ins. Near own goal. Near opposing goal. Fouls. Own half. Opponents half. Side fouls. Centered fouls. Corners. Number of players participating in the plays. Defensive surveillance.

10) Other points of interest.

Obviously, this must be accompanied by the necessary graphics where all these circumstances can be seen. As we said, many of these matches do not have video of it, so the coach should have as much information as possible from the scout view. Moreover, this report should be long enough to give the most information, but concentrate enough to not do heavy reading. Remember that this information is transmitted to the players, and if the coach can not assimilate all that is said, hardly able to communicate to the players and prepare for training the necessary actions.

You should also think that not all coaches are equal and not all want the same amount or the same type of information. Some want to know more about how they defend than how they attack. Others want a lot of information about set-pieces, etc. It is very important, when making a report of this kind, to know what the coach wants and at the same time, what we can consider the most important.

Like almost everything in the world of football, scouting and analysis of the opponents has become another one specialty. And, it is very normal that many coaches have in their staff someone responsible for this work. The more we know of the opponents, better for us.

John Le Carré made an art about espionage in his books. These "spies" of today continue to give information that is used for winning and losing wars ... in football, fortunately, though "Football is not a matter of life or death. It's much more important than that."

THE ART OF SPYING (& II)

I spoke a few weeks ago about Scouting at level teams, watch their movements, their tactics, set-pieces, etc.

Now I will talk about players. How can we see that a player is good/useful for our team?

The first thing to do is to distinguish between two types of scouting. One is that when the clubs are looking for a certain player for a given position. The second is people who are dedicated to seeing players (even working for a particular club), without any specific position on the pitch.

In the first case, since there is no perfect player, you have to find the closest thing to what we want and sometimes we have to decide which features are more important than others. I will not go much more in this part, since we are talking about a scouting "made to measure".

We go to the most usual. Going to see (live or on TV), football players. What we have to look to decide if a player is or is not a good player? Well there are many things, but for me, the most important is speed. But speed does not mean just being faster than the others running. In fact, we can distinguish 3 kinds of speed: the "physical" speed, "mental" speed and "action" speed.

The "physical" speed is what we have said before. Fast player. The arriving before the opponent to the ball, either attacking, and defending it. This player is always interesting, because we can always teach him to play. Whether running from the flank and crossing, either to arrive before the striker to a long ball. Cristiano Ronaldo, Bale, Jordi Alba, David Luiz may be examples of such players.

The "mental" speed is the one which allows the player to do things before anyone else. Usually they make play their mates, because they usually give the ball ready to be played well. You will recognize these types of players easily, since they are always with the head up, scanning the entire field to see where the ball can go. They are players who are always where they are supposed to be, sometimes to cut and retrieve a ball, sometimes to make a decisive pass. Xavi, Pirlo, Riquelme, Gerrard or Busquets are players who fit this profile.

Finally, we have the "actional" speed, the executive, the player that makes the actions at a very much higher speed than the rest, either to shoot on goal, either to dribble an opponent, either to change the orientation of game at first touch. Messi, Iniesta, Robben, Ibrahimovic and Rooney would be players in this style.

However, what is common to all these players, that do different things, playing in different parts of the pitch, which don't have the same functions in a football team? Well, these players are "different", ie they do different things to what we can consider "normal".

Cruyff once said that with 5 meters of space, any player can make a pass 30 meters away. It's about to make this happen when you have the opponent close to you. It's about dribbling opponents changing 3 times the pace on 20 meters. That is, it's not quality "per se", but quality at high speed; this is what distinguishes some players from another. And when we speak of "decision making", we talk about the same. About the player that, as far as he will receive the ball he knows what to do with it: running with it, short pass, long pass, etc.

But that's not all. To do it right, it's not just to look at what a player does. Must see what the player can do. What does this mean? It means to study the characteristics of the player and see if its features can be used for other functions. A winger, could play as central midfielder? A center back, could he play as attacking midfielder? And so, with all players. In fact, as it is not always done, the reports should include, further than all the points of the players, all their options. Many times players are signed without knowing exactly all their potential.

But, as all activities where there is the human factor, the scouting is not an exact science. The "nose", the intuition, makes a lot, sometimes, when you are spying players. You see a player who has done nothing for most of the game and, in a play he decides it, either with a shot, with dribbling, with a pass. Or, even if not decisive, but when nobody expects it. As mentioned before, the "different" player.

We still have the goalkeepers. What is the first job of a goalie? Stop balls. Therefore, this is what we have to look. If you do this or that, but does not save goals, no good. Then we go to the aerial game, or foot play, or this or that feature. But first, to stop the balls. And, do not forget that the goalie who makes a great save, but concedes a goal after the rejection, it is very possible that he has saved badly. It is not just saving the ball. It is to save the ball and the opponents do not have a second choice. Remember that good goalies win games, but the great goalkeepers win championships.

But also with the goalkeepers, they must be fast. Fast to put a hand, to get back into position after a long ball rejected, fast to go to this long ball. The one that is not fast is no good for football.