

Attacking playing styles in world football

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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.

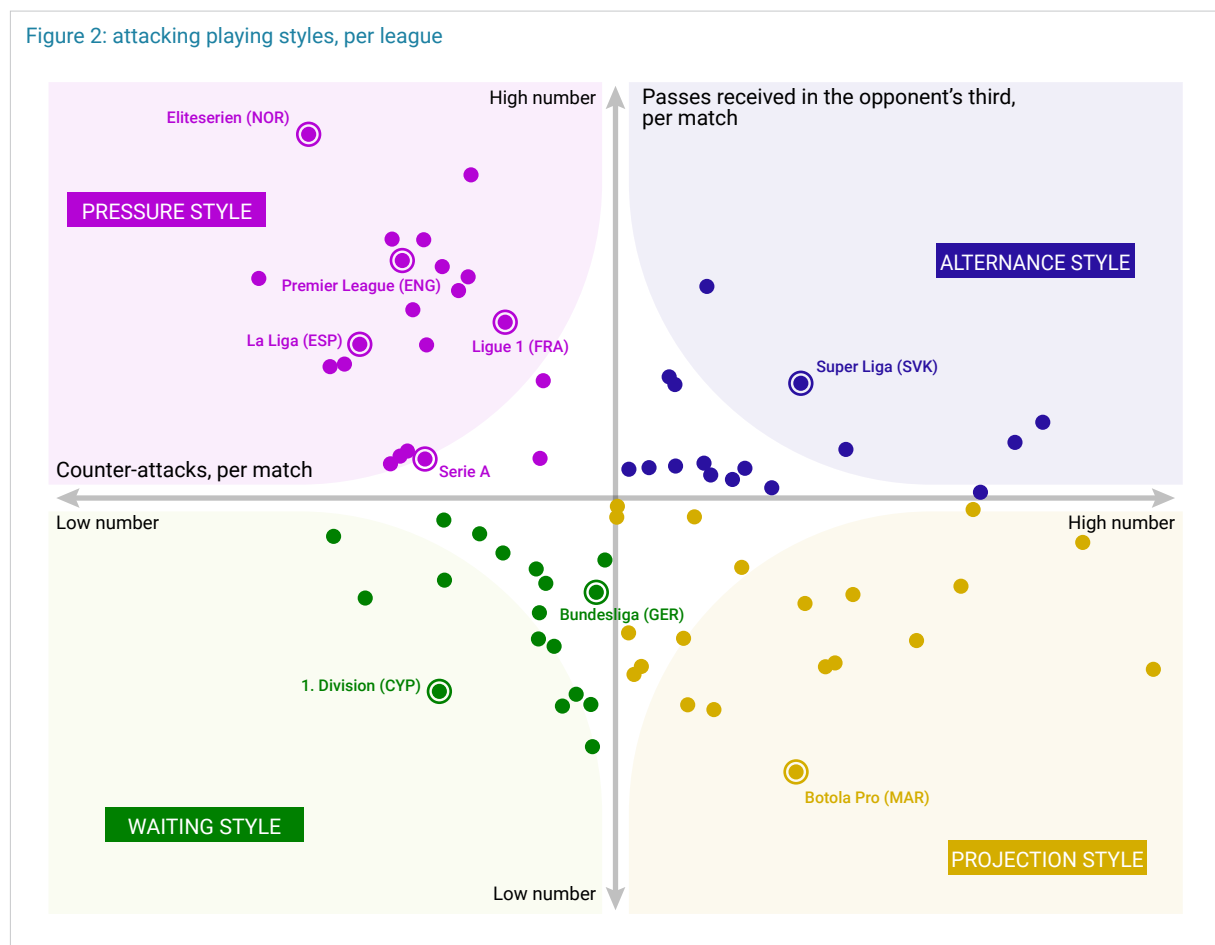
Positional attacks are defined by the indicator of the number of passes received by teammates in the opponent's third, while fast attacks are defined by the number of counter-attacks. According to InStat lexicon, counter-attacks define open play attacks carried out after recovering the ball from the 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 |
| DEU | 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.



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% |

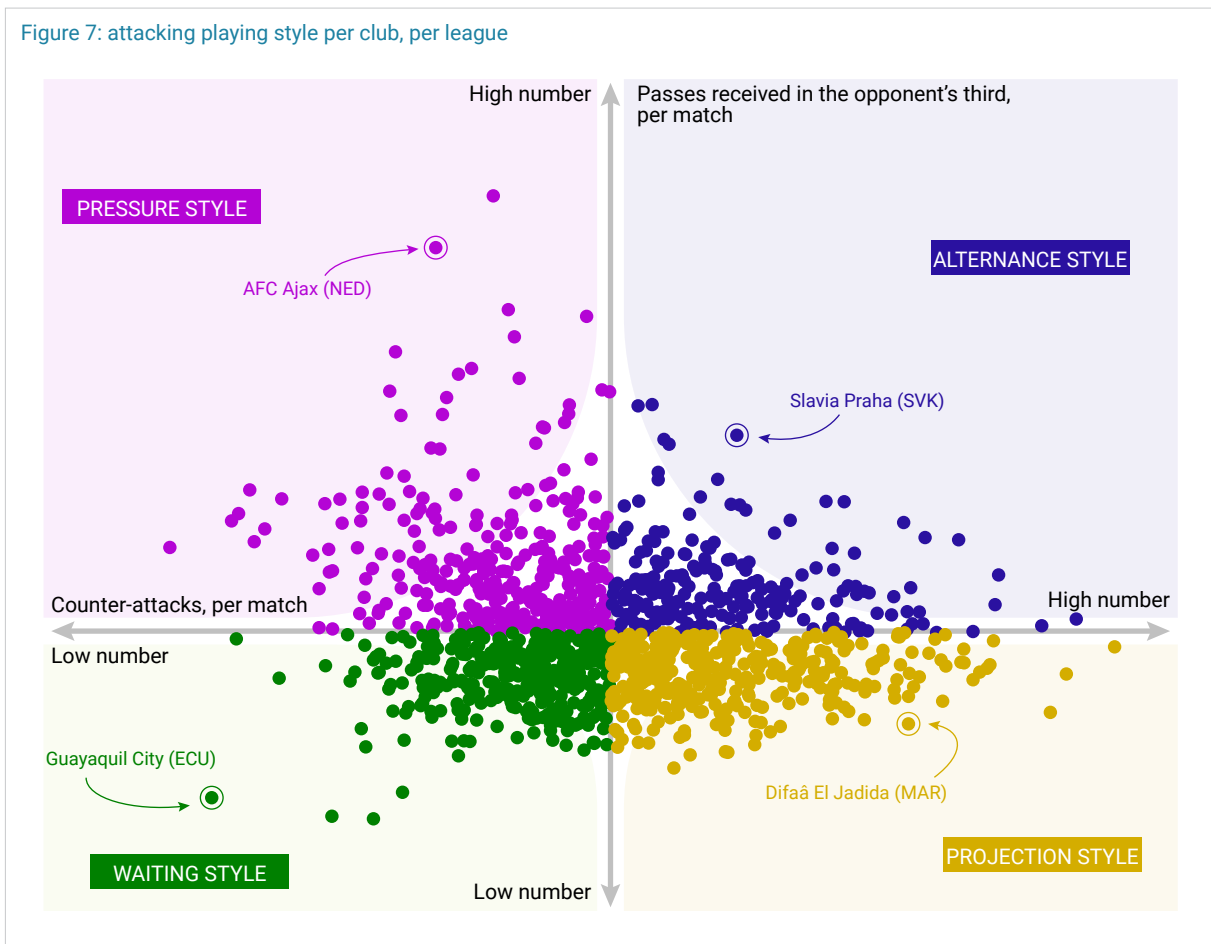
Figure 6: “projection” style leagues (from most to less typical)

| | 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.

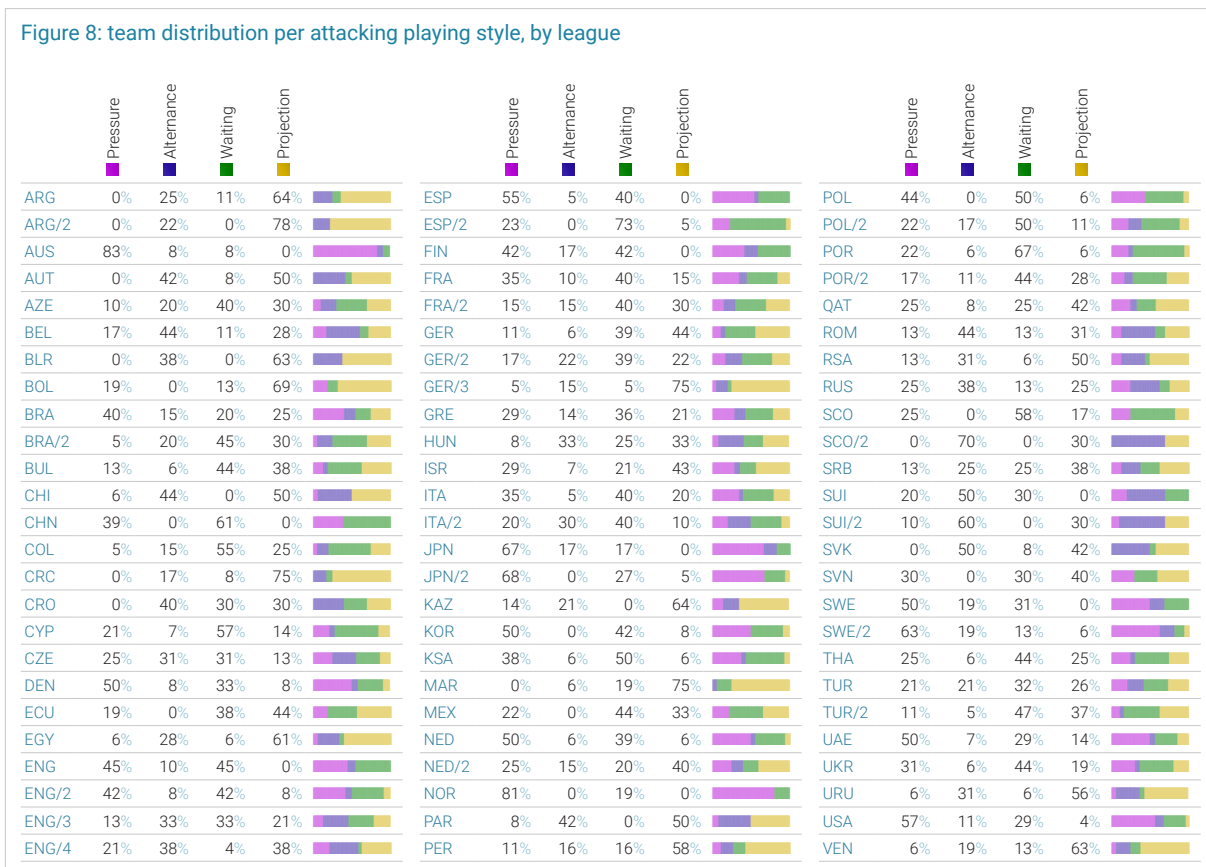
Figure 7: attacking playing style per club, per league



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.