

'Call-for-the-ball' runs and styles of play: a worldwide analysis

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1. Introduction

Thanks to the new 'game intelligence' data produced by our partners [SkillCorner](#), it is now possible to understand all the types of runs made by players during a match. In this report, we analyse more specifically the runs made by footballers when a teammate is in possession of the ball, with the aim of positioning themselves to receive it, defined as 'call-for-the-ball' runs.

While statistical attention is generally focused on the ball carrier, the positioning and movements of teammates are also essential for analysing the context of the action and, more generally, the style of play of both the footballers calling for the ball and their teams. In the latter respect, a study of the number and proportion of the different types of 'call-for-the-ball' runs enables us to identify the dominant strategies used to organise attacking play.

The sample analysed in this Monthly Report is made up of the statistics gathered by SkillCorner from 3,261 matches played during the 2023 or 2023/24 seasons in 27 leagues spread across Europe and the Americas, as detailed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: study sample

	Season	matches
 Primera División (ARG)	2023	488
 Bundesliga (AUT)	2023/2024	60
 Pro League (BEL)	2023/2024	80
 Brasileirão (BRA)	2023	259
 HNL (CRO)	2023/2024	51
 Czech Liga (CZE)	2023/2024	87
 Superliga (DEN)	2023/2024	66
 Premier League (ENG)	2023/2024	80
 Championship (ENG/2)	2023/2024	132
 Primera División (ESP)	2023/2024	89
 Segunda División (ESP/2)	2023/2024	110
 Ligue 1 (FRA)	2023/2024	71
 Ligue 2 (FRA/2)	2023/2024	100
 Bundesliga (GER)	2023/2024	62
 2. Bundesliga (GER/2)	2023/2024	79
 Serie A (ITA)	2023/2024	80
 Serie B (ITA/2)	2023/2024	84
 Liga MX (MEX)	2023/2024	104
 Eredivisie (NED)	2023/2024	70
 Ekstraklasa (POL)	2023/2024	96
 Primeira Liga (POR)	2023/2024	72
 Premiership (SCO)	2023/2024	47
 Super League (SUI)	2023/2024	58
 Allsvenskan (SWE)	2023	208
 Süper Lig (TUR)	2023/2024	79
 Premier League (UKR)	2023/2024	74
 MLS (USA)	2023	475

2. A typology of 'call-for-the-ball' runs

SkillCorner's data classifies players' 'call-for-the-ball' runs into ten categories, that we have grouped into eight sets for the purposes of this report as specified below. A 'call-for-the-ball' run is defined as a period of more than 0.7 seconds during which the player exceeds 15 km/h and represents a passing option for the teammate in possession of the ball.

To be considered as such, the pass option implies a high probability that the player calling for the ball will be chosen by the ball carrier as the receiver of the pass, given their respective position and orientation. As a result, some of the runs made by the ball carrier's teammates are not considered to be 'call-for-the-ball' ones.

The eight categories used in our analysis are the following* :

(1) **Dropping off**: the player offering the passing option runs towards his own side to open up a passing angle for the ball carrier and create superiority in possession.

(2) **Coming short**: the player offering the passing option runs towards the ball carrier to reduce the passing distance. The player's movement is mainly towards his own side, but can also be in other directions.

(3) **Lateral**: player offering the passing option makes a 'call-for-the-ball' run across the width of the pitch, moving from the centre to the edge (pulling-wide and pulling half-space in SkillCorner's terminology).

(4) **Over/Underlap**: the player offering the passing option runs behind or in front of the ball carrier, over- or underlapping in the direction of the opposing goal.

(5) **Support run**: the player offering the passing option runs behind the ball carrier during an offensive transition phase.

(6) **Run ahead of the ball**: the player offering the pass option runs in front of the ball carrier towards the opposing goal but does not break the last defensive line.

(7) **In behind**: the player offering the passing option attacks the space behind the last defensive line in the direction of the opposing goal.

(8) **Cross receiver**: the player offering the pass option runs towards the goal to receive an actual or potential cross.

As mentioned above, all these 'call-for-the-ball' runs are made when the team is in possession of the ball. They therefore only include attacking actions and not runs made during defensive phases. As such, they do not reflect players' total physical activity, but rather the context surrounding the player in possession of the ball, pointing thus to the offensive tactical strategies deployed by teams.

* See also the SkillCorner glossary [here](#).

3. A breakdown of 'call-for-the-ball' runs by position

During the matches analysed, the players made an average of 15.1 'call-for-the-ball' runs per game corresponding to the definition used. This figure greatly varies according to position, with a maximum of 19.2 for attacking midfielders and a minimum of 5.5 for centre backs. These figures reflect the different ways in which players are involved in attacking play according to their position.

The eight categories of 'call-for-the-ball' runs identified have a heterogeneous distribution. With 21.7% of the events, the most numerous 'call-for-the-ball' runs are those ahead of the ball carrier (in front of him without breaking the opposing last defensive line), followed by those in support of the ball carrier (behind him during an attacking transition) with 17.6%. In contrast, over/underlapping (6.4%) and lateral (9.0%) 'call-for-the-ball' runs are the least frequent.

These variations are linked both to the different running opportunities during possession and the number of players involved. Indeed, while an over/underlapping or lateral 'call-for-the-ball' runs generally only involve one teammate, support or ahead of the ball 'call-for-the-ball' runs often involve several players simultaneously.

Figure 2: average number of 'call-for-the-ball' runs per 90', per player and position

Centre backs	5.5	
Full backs	15.1	
Defensive midfielders	15.2	
Attacking midfielders	19.2	
Wingers	18.0	
Forwards	17.5	
Average	15.1	

Figure 3: distribution of 'call-for-the-ball' runs, per category

Ahead of the ball	21.7%	██████████
Support	17.5%	██████████
Dropping off	15.0%	██████████
Coming short	10.7%	██████████
In behind	10.5%	██████████
Cross receiver	9.2%	██████████
Lateral	9.0%	██████████
Over/Underlap	6.4%	██████████

The distribution of 'call-for-the-ball' runs varies greatly depending on the players' position. For example, centre backs make more than half of their 'call-for-the-ball' runs by dropping off, while full-backs are relatively more involved in support and over/underlap runs. Conversely, centre forwards are more likely to make in behind (beyond the defensive line), ahead of the ball (within it), as well as cross receiver 'call-for-the-ball' runs.

Figure 4: distribution of 'call-for-the-ball' runs, per position and category

(a) Centre backs

Dropping off	57.3%	
Coming short	7.5%	
Lateral	5.9%	
Over/Underlap	3.3%	
Support	15.5%	
Ahead of the ball	7.5%	
In behind	1.0%	
Cross receiver	2.0%	

(b) Full backs

Dropping off	11.2%	
Coming short	3.1%	
Lateral	10.3%	
Over/Underlap	17.0%	
Support	24.2%	
Ahead of the ball	24.5%	
In behind	5.7%	
Cross receiver	3.9%	

(c) Defensive midfielders

Dropping off	6.8%	
Coming short	24.5%	
Lateral	8.8%	
Over/Underlap	4.1%	
Support	24.7%	
Ahead of the ball	20.3%	
In behind	4.6%	
Cross receiver	6.1%	

(d) Attacking midfielders

Dropping off	3.0%	
Coming short	11.7%	
Lateral	11.5%	
Over/Underlap	6.0%	
Support	18.3%	
Ahead of the ball	28.1%	
In behind	10.5%	
Cross receiver	10.8%	

(e) Wingers

Dropping off	1.9%	
Coming short	7.2%	
Lateral	11.0%	
Over/Underlap	6.0%	
Support	12.4%	
Ahead of the ball	31.6%	
In behind	16.7%	
Cross receiver	13.2%	

(f) Forwards

Dropping off	0.5%	
Coming short	6.7%	
Lateral	7.8%	
Over/Underlap	2.2%	
Support	6.3%	
Ahead of the ball	24.0%	
In behind	29.3%	
Cross receiver	23.3%	

4. Leagues and teams with different styles

In addition to the differences that can logically be observed according to players' position, there are also differences in the distribution of 'call-for-the-ball' runs depending on the leagues and teams. The differences are most apparent between two main categories: runs to call for the ball at feet (dropping off, coming short and lateral) and runs to call for the ball in space (support, ahead of the ball, in behind, cross receiver and under/overlap).

The five types of 'call-for-the-ball' runs into space account for 72.2% of the total: between more than three quarters for the teams whose players make them most and around two thirds for the clubs where footballers make them least. Figure 5 shows the proportion of the different running categories according to the teams' rank in the table of clubs whose players make proportionally the most 'calls-for-the-ball' in space.

Figure 5: distribution of runs, per category and rank in the 'call-for-the-ball' in space hierarchy

	at feet				in space			
	Dropping off	Coming short	Lateral	Support	Ahead of the ball	Over/Underlap	In behind	Cross receiver
1-100	5.7%	8.5%	8.7%	18.5%	26.0%	7.2%	13.4%	12.0%
101-200	6.5%	10.0%	9.4%	17.5%	25.1%	6.9%	13.3%	11.4%
201-300	7.2%	11.1%	9.5%	16.9%	24.2%	7.1%	12.9%	11.1%
301-400	8.0%	11.7%	10.0%	16.6%	23.8%	6.4%	12.7%	10.8%
401-491	9.6%	13.4%	10.4%	15.8%	22.9%	6.1%	12.0%	9.9%

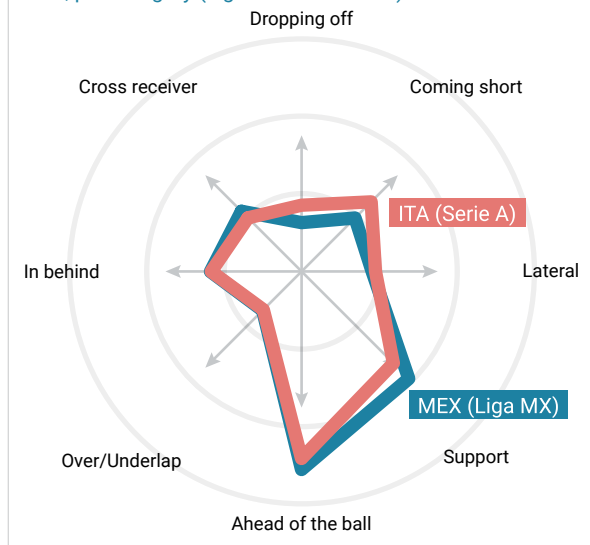
Across the 27 leagues analysed, the maximum number of 'calls-for-the-ball' runs into space was measured in Mexico's Liga MX (74.9%), while the minimum was recorded in Italy's Serie A (69.2%). These differences reflect the distinction between the leagues where a majority of teams follow an attacking tactical scheme based on projection play (with more calls-for-the-ball for forward passes) and those where more clubs adopt an attacking strategy built on positional play (with more calls-for-the-ball for backward, short and lateral passes).

More specifically, Figure 7 illustrates the distribution between the eight types of 'call-for-the-ball' runs for the teams in the league whose players make the most 'calls-for-the-ball' in space (Liga MX) and the one where the footballers make the least (Serie A). The biggest differences are for 'coming short' runs (+2.9% in Italy) and 'support' runs (+2.8% in Mexico).

Figure 6: % of 'call-for-the-ball' runs in space, per league

	Liga MX (MEX)	74.9%
	Super League (SUI)	74.6%
	Primera División (ARG)	74.0%
	HNL (CRO)	73.6%
	Süper Lig (TUR)	73.5%
	Brasileirão (BRA)	73.5%
	2. Bundesliga (GER/2)	73.4%
	MLS (USA)	73.3%
	Primera División (ESP)	73.3%
	Premiership (SCO)	72.9%
	Bundesliga (AUT)	72.7%
	Czech Liga (CZE)	72.5%
	Primeira Liga (POR)	72.5%
	Ligue 2 (FRA/2)	72.4%
	Pro League (BEL)	72.0%
	Serie B (ITA/2)	72.0%
	Premier League (UKR)	71.9%
	Superliga (DEN)	71.3%
	Ligue 1 (FRA)	71.0%
	Eredivisie (NED)	71.0%
	Bundesliga (GER)	70.7%
	Championship (ENG/2)	70.4%
	Allsvenskan (SWE)	70.0%
	Ekstraklasa (POL)	69.6%
	Serie A (ITA)	69.3%

Figure 7: distribution of 'call-for-the-ball' runs, per category (Liga MX and Serie A)



At club level, the highest values in terms of the proportion of 'call-for-the-ball' runs in space (in front of the ball carrier) were observed for Cercle Brugge (85.8%), Querétaro FC (82.9%) and Dundee FC (82.0%), which thus constitute archetypes of projection play. Conversely, the highest percentages of 'call-for-the-ball' runs at feet (behind or laterally to the ball carrier) were measured for Burnley FC (39.3%), Real Sociedad (38.8%) and Eintracht Frankfurt (38.5%), these teams thus representing archetypes of positional play.

In more detail, Figure 10 shows the differences in the distribution of runs between Sevilla FC, a team whose players proportionally make a lot of 'calls-for-the-ball' into space, and Manchester City, a club where players are more inclined to make 'calls-for-the-ball' at feet. In this case, the biggest gaps were measured for 'coming short' runs (+10.3% for Manchester City) and 'cross receiver' runs (+7.7% for Sevilla).

Figure 8: top percentage of 'call-for-the-ball' runs in space, per club

1		Cercle Brugge (BEL)	85.8%
2		Querétaro FC (MEX)	82.9%
3		Dundee FC (SCO)	82.0%
4		Portland Timbers (USA)	80.7%
5		FC St. Gallen (SUI)	80.6%
6		SC Farense (POR)	80.2%
7		Sivasspor (TUR)	79.6%
8		Los Angeles FC (USA)	79.4%
9		CF Monterrey (MEX)	79.1%
10		América FC (BRA)	79.0%

Figure 9: top percentage of 'call-for-the-ball' runs at feet, per club

1		Burnley FC (ENG)	39.3%
2		Real Sociedad (ESP)	38.8%
3		Eintracht Frankfurt (GER)	38.5%
4		Swansea City (ENG/2)	38.4%
.		Manchester City (ENG)	38.4%
6		Raków Częstochowa (POL)	38.2%
7		Paris St-Germain (FRA)	37.9%
8		Sint-Truidense VV (BEL)	37.1%
9		Rio Ave FC (POR)	36.3%
.		AS Roma (ITA)	36.3%

Figure 10: distribution of 'call-for-the-ball' runs, per category (Sevilla and Manchester City)



5. Conclusion

The analysis carried out in this report shows just how useful contextual data can be in describing how teams play. The statistics on the different types of 'call-for-the-ball' runs are not, of course, independent of the events observed in relation to the ball carrier, such as the number of passes, shots or other interceptions, but they allow an even more detailed description of the habits of the teams in their attacking play, with a definite advantage in terms of defining a style of play and the tactical preparation of matches.

Combined with physical data specific to players, such as top speeds, number of accelerations or distances covered, 'game intelligence' statistics such as the 'call-for-the-ball' runs are also extremely valuable on an individual level. They can indeed be used to draw up a reliable and complete portrait of footballers, with multiple possible applications ranging from performance measurement and improvement, to recruitment choices and strategies.

The first analysis of SkillCorner's 'game intelligence' data in the context of this Monthly Report therefore opens up new potential and prospects for understanding the game at both player and team level, which we will be eager to continue to exploit and disseminate to as many people as possible in the periods to come.