

THE ULTIMATE BOOK OF SOCCER SET-PIECES

STRATEGIES FOR ATTACK AND DEFENSE RESTARTS



TONY ENGLUND

**MEYER
& MEYER
SPORT**

For Tony Jr. and Carole Englund and Ted and Joan Anderson

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This book is a product of strange times. I began writing the manuscript over the holidays in 2019. By the time I write this note, in April of 2020, the world is a different place amidst the Coronavirus pandemic. Soccer has been utterly sidetracked as so many of us watch, dumbfounded, as thousands die. Indeed, I vacillate between thinking that soccer seems pretty trivial compared to all of the concerns about avoiding and surviving illness on the one hand, and being immensely grateful for the thousands of hours I have spent on the field with friends before all of this madness set in. It seems that if there is a lesson to draw from this era it is coming at too great a price.

That said, one of the gifts of writing and learning is that they are pursuits that help us think about better times and the importance of focusing on the positive, even when it's difficult to find at times. I have been a coach for thirty years now, and it has been a wonderful, steep learning curve with lots of colorful personalities, good friends and great memories along the way.

I want to thank Meyer & Meyer publishing for supporting this writing project. I had the pleasure of meeting publisher Martin Meyer and editor Liz Evans for the first time in person in Baltimore in January of this year, and I was thoroughly impressed with their passion for people, education, and books. I asked them for permission to pursue this project because I feel sure that set-piece education is a major hole

in the coaching literature and teaching curricula, and this is a facet of the game that coaches instinctively know can be decisive in a team's success or failure.

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1

IMPACT: THE INFLUENCE OF SET- PIECES ON THE MODERN GAME

World Cup 2018 saw a record 66 goals scored from set-piece situations (42% of the 155 total goals scored), a remarkable and emphatic statement regarding the influence of set-pieces on the modern game.

In the English Premier League, the number of set-piece goals reached 246 in the 2018-2019 campaign, up 10% over the previous campaign, and part of an evident trend over the past decade.ⁱ

A fascinating, recent study of three seasons in the English Premier League determined that teams were more likely to score from set-pieces (1.8%) as compared with normal possessions (1.1%).ⁱⁱ That same study pointed out that teams significantly improved their overall goals for/goals against ratio by excelling at defending set-pieces, and those same teams often found survival in the Premier League, or demotion, was related to their success at set-pieces.ⁱⁱⁱ

Still, the following two statements apply to many coaches and teams at all levels of the game.

1. Resources for coaches to learn about and refine set-piece training are scant and dated.
2. Coaches tend not to devote a lot of training time to set-piece preparation.

Why?

Let's quickly examine the nature and challenges of the dearth of preparation for set-piece success.

Very little in the way of guidance for coaches exists to help them prepare their teams to win the set-piece battle. The written literature on the subject is largely dated and thin, and coaching schools generally eschew any in-depth exploration of set-pieces. Indeed, I was told by an instructor that "the selection of set-piece plays and defending thereof are dependent upon level, personnel, and the coaches' preferences." True enough. However, the same is often said of systems of play, which most of us debate in detail in coaching courses. Set-pieces arguably influence the outcome of matches at a level commensurate with systems of play.

Coaches tend to follow one or both of these two patterns in set-piece preparation:

1. complex plays they witnessed in watching high-level matches, or
2. coaches like to just give general themes for set-pieces (e.g., serve the ball to the penalty spot on corner kicks and have some runners converge there).

The result is that players and coaches often devote very little time to set-piece rehearsal, as this becomes a fairly dry and sometimes frustrating component of practice. Indeed, set-pieces are often one of the last topics added to the training docket, fit in as a necessity shortly before matches begin.

Consider, then, that teams average roughly 20 attacking set-pieces (free and penalty kicks, corner kicks and throws in the front third).^{iv} Add on to this the potential damage of defending an average of twenty more set-pieces. If the team could win the set-piece battle, scoring more goals from set-pieces than are allowed, and if the team could achieve an increased proficiency by finishing, for example, two set-pieces per match, what kind of dramatic impact would this have on results? One has to think that if coaches at every level consider the trends and potential impact, there will be much more set-piece preparation going forward.

This volume is intended to be a complete exploration of the potential of set-piece situations in modern soccer. The body of the work will be a detailed examination of set-piece considerations on both sides of the ball and hundreds of examples of the most effective plays, as well as how to defend those situations. This book will be the most expansive, thoughtful study ever completed on the subject. It is hoped that coaches of every level will want to have this resource available to help prepare their teams.

PROCESS: SET-PIECE SELECTION

If the evidence that set-pieces have a decisive influence on the game is clear, and that selecting plays and training to attack and defend these situations is a desirable, but often less than efficient investment of training time, what must coaches do to incorporate set-piece preparation as a challenging, necessary component of training?

Coaches must first think through the requirements of each set-piece. Let's consider, for example, how many players should be deployed near the goal to defend a corner kick? Should the team put players on the post(s) in those situations? Zonal or one-on-one, or a mix? What are the goalkeeper's responsibilities? How will the team defend a short corner option?

The sharp trend toward the use of analytics to examine productive preparation has dramatic potential to influence how teams prepare. Indeed, many of the most recent and surprising statistical conclusions, drawn from scientific papers, are included in the body of this book. Clearly, there are myriad considerations.

As was pointed out in the previous section, each coach will also need to balance their own preferences with other variables.

Some additional considerations for every set-piece include:

- 1.** The abilities of their team. A team that fields a lot of tall, less-mobile players may want to play more zone.
- 2.** Age/level of their team. Clearly, younger youth teams will have less complex schemes in every sense for dealing with set-pieces.

- 3.** The proclivities of their opponents. If the opponent always runs short corner kick plays, special consideration might be required as to how to close down these plays.
- 4.** Weather. For example, defending corner kicks in the rain and/or heavy wind tends to be troublesome.
- 5.** Match conditions. For example, if the team is leading by a goal late and concedes a corner kick, perhaps it will be desirable to add more players to the defensive scheme in front of goal.
- 6.** In the case of defending corners, what is the team's attitude regarding counter-attacking after the serve? Some teams will risk more and leave an extra player up high in the hope that they can punish the opponent with a fast counterattack after the kick is defended.

After contemplating these and other variables, coaches must then select the best scheme(s) for their teams for each set-piece situation.

If the process of selecting and particularly implementing and rehearsing set-pieces is typically undertreated and static, what additional steps can be taken to make refinement more engaging and efficient? Set-piece training can be incorporated, either in the flow of training matches, or in active isolation, as a component of exercises to make it more intense and realistic. Many examples of both types of training are included in the final portion of the book. In addition, one of the most challenging aspects of set-piece training is preparing players and teams for the mental demands of these situations. Accordingly, the book also

includes a concluding chapter on the importance of designing training to replicate the demands of the match set-piece situation.

Taken together, this discussion has highlighted the complex nature of set-piece design and the challenges of effectively preparing the team for set-piece execution in match situations.

2 SET-PIECES

KICK-OFFS

Kick-offs tend to be among the most neglected of set-pieces with regard to preparation. Most teams are of one of two mindsets. Some coaches simply want to keep the ball away from their own goal. Consequently, the team is instructed to play the ball deep to a corner in the opposition's end of the field. This is a safe option, particularly at the youth level, where the dangers of mental lapses across the team in the opening moments of play or the return to play after a goal can be a concern. The concern here is an obvious one, in that the team is conceding possession with just a few touches of the ball.

Other coaches want to get their players a touch on the ball and get the ball circulating immediately on the kick-off. These teams tend to knock the ball around in their own half a bit, developing rhythm and getting the team's identity on the ball established. The danger here, of course, is that there can be a tendency to turn the ball over given that the game has just started or restarted, and the opponent can be free to press without much concern and with fresh legs.

Who trains their team to defend kick-offs? Interesting question, and the answer is likely very few. Does the team ease into the defending, more concerned with keeping the

ball in front of them, or does the team fly into their opponent's end, trying to win the ball immediately? Either way, the discussion and mentality are very important to how the team approaches defending kick-offs.

ATTACKING CONSIDERATIONS

- 1.** Does the team want to go forward immediately?
- 2.** Does the team prefer to knock the ball around and get everyone involved?
- 3.** Is there a reliable long-ball server who can put the ball in a dangerous space right away?
- 4.** How many players should the team commit to an immediate attacking move?
- 5.** Does the team have speedy player(s) who can perhaps surprise the opponent off of the start?
- 6.** Is there a player, perhaps not a front-line player, on whom the team should depend to start the attack? For example, perhaps there is a dominant personality in the midfield that is the target of any early possession after a kick-off.
- 7.** Does a particular opponent offer an opening for a specific kick-off play? For example, a team that immediately presses high may be vulnerable to an early long ball service.

8. Does the team need multiple options, perhaps one for the opening kick-off and one for subsequent kicks?



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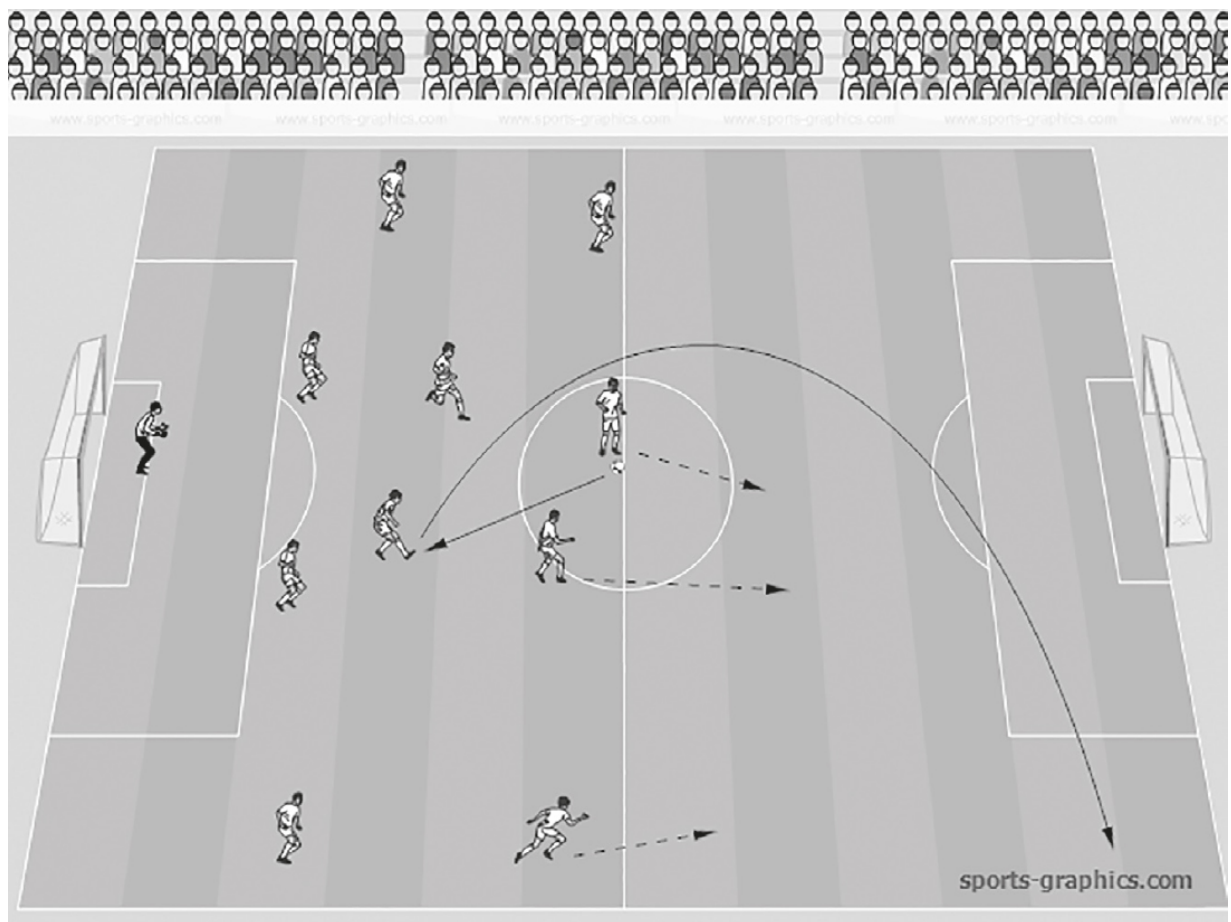
Marco Reus of Borussia Dortmund prepares to kick off a Bundesliga match at Bayern Munich.

ATTACKING PLAYS



Typical attacking shape for a kick-off. Note the expanded shape, with the outside backs and wingers shading wider to create more space both for the attackers and also in the defensive shape of the opponent. Players likely to be involved in any opening move (i.e., the center forward and central midfielders) are arrayed around the ball. The center backs are split to give more room and better angles for possession, and the goalkeeper is in a position to be an outlet against early pressure. There are many variants, of course, but the general idea here is to give a framework from which players can be moved to create a particular attacking sequence.

Conservative Start

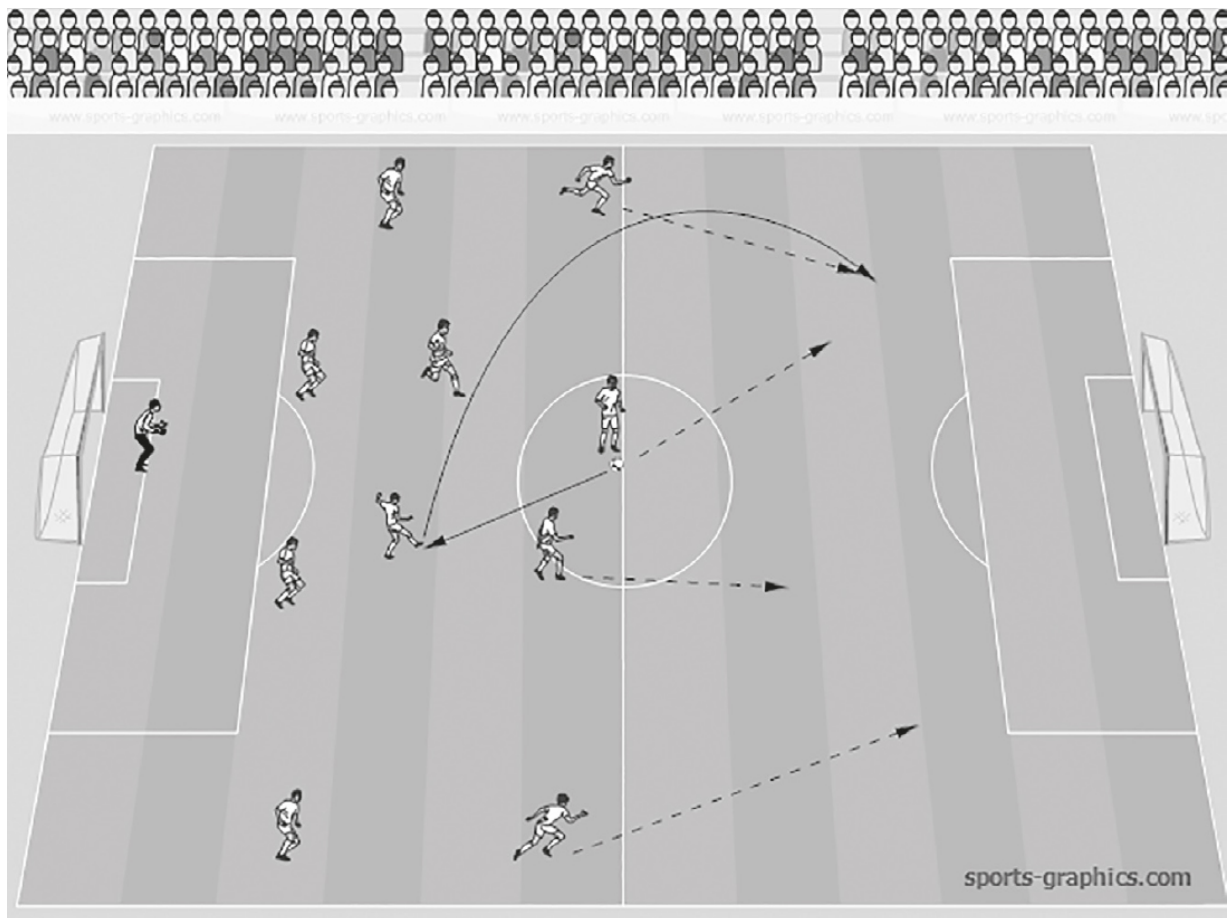


This is a safe option, and one that many coaches opt to pursue to start a game or half and also with a lead. Off of the kick-off, the striker plays a negative pass to a holding midfielder (this could be any player designated to play in that spot for the moment due to their ability to play a powerful long ball on a consistent basis). The holding midfielder plays the ball high and deep to a designated attacking corner of the field. It is very important that this ball be played deep enough to turn as many as possible of the opponents to face and move toward their own goal.

The coach can designate the level of pressure to be applied immediately to the ball. In the diagram above, the near-side wing, center forward and attacking midfielder begin to move toward the ball with the idea of applying pressure far from

the team's goal. The coach might move the entire team forward, or opt to impose a *low restraining* line, perhaps allowing the other team to get into possession in with the idea that the team will be compact and able to defend against any long ball.

Flank Attack



This is a common approach to taking a positive, if low-risk, approach to the kick-off. Similar to the previous option, the ball is laid off and then played deep into the opponents' half. However, the target this time is not an area, but rather a winger. This approach can work well if the team possesses a dangerous, speedy player, who may win in an isolated duel