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## MANCHESTER UNITED, INTERNAZIONALE MILANO AND FC BARCELONA – WHAT’S DIFFERENT?

### Introduction

Although football is considered a universal language, there are particularities that characterize the way it is practiced in several countries. Overall, the style of English football is known as “*Kick and Rush*”, the Italian as “*Catenaccio*”, and the Spanish as “*Fúria Española*”.

The literature in the field of sociology and anthropology (Györi Szabó, 2011; Hamil, et al., 2010; Hargrave, 2007; Nogueira, 2011) provides important insight into the aspects described above. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research comparing the different professional teams used in this study (Manchester United, Internazionale Milano and FC Barcelona). The available studies that investigated the different leagues have essentially focused on: i) anthropometric data (Bloomfield, Polman, Butterfly, & O’Donoghue, 2005); ii) technical aspects (Dellal et al., 2011; Obserstone, 2011); and iii) motor activity data (Dellal et al., 2011).

This study aims to understand which aspects in the characterization of playing styles of the different soccer teams are the most important for coaches. The English, Italian and Spanish Leagues have been chosen for this study because they are considered by the International Federation of Football History and Statistics (IFFHS), the three strongest European Leagues of the 1<sup>st</sup> Decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In order to allow coaches to consider the wider context of the leagues they play in, the analysis focused also on the three teams - Barcelona, Inter Milan and Manchester United - that won their respective leagues in the season prior to the data collection.

### Methods

We chose 8 expert high-performance Portuguese first league football coaches (Coach 1 to Coach 8) with a professional experience (as first coach) ranging from 2 to 30 years ( $14.9 \pm 8.6$  years). All coaches, who were initially selected to participate in

the study and who accepted the invitation, were coaching professionally at the time the interviews were taken, and had worked at some point in their careers as Head coaches in the Portuguese League.

Because of the in-depth character of each interview, the interpretational nature of the analysis, and the number of the teams in the first league (n=16), 8 coaches were considered representative and met the objectives of the study, as well as the criteria of expert selection (previous experience as Head coach in the first Portuguese League; UEFA Pro licensed coach).

#### Instruments

We used semi-structured interviews to collect the data (Bardin, 2008); the advantages of using this type of interview are diverse when compared to other methods of data collection (Flick, 2005; Quivy & Campenhout, 2005). The interview guide was designed to identify the most relevant issues for the coach so that a further in-depth exploration could be done.

The certification of the content validity of the interview was done according to common qualitative research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). More specifically, it was attained after preparation and discussion of previous drafts of the transcript, based on the following steps: i) preparation of first draft of the transcript based on the specific aims of the study and available literature (Castelo, 2009; Carling et al., 2005; Knudsson & Morrison, 2002); ii) evaluation of the interview transcripts by three senior researchers in sports pedagogy, who have substantial experience with qualitative methods; iii) discussion of findings based on the presented suggestions by each; iv) a pilot study done with a Portuguese first league coach; v) minor adaptations to the transcripts resulting from the reflections of the pilot study; vi) resubmission of the updated version of the transcripts to the experts; this, ultimately resulted in the final version of the interview guide.

#### Data Collection

All the interviews were done by the first author, between December 2011 and February 2012, in a relaxed setting (normally in the office) at the football academies where the different coaches work. The interview began by stating the general information about the purpose of the project. Next, the interviewer focused on background and demographic information. And finally, a more in-depth exploration of the topic followed. None of the interviews were rushed, and the coaches had time to clarify and reformulate their thinking. Each interview took between 1 and 2½ hours and was transcribed verbatim (223/59 pages).

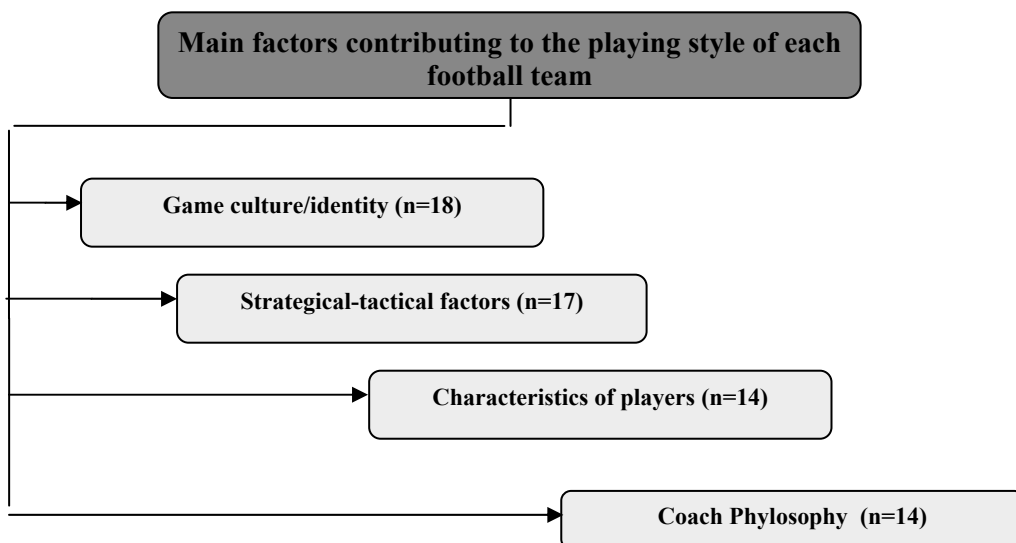
#### Data analysis

The objective of the analysis was to build a system of categories that emerged from the unstructured data and that represented the organization and utilization of expert high-performance football coaches' view of the topic.

Data analysis was performed using content analysis (Bardin, 2008), and through combining inductive and deductive approaches, the text units were coded and text units with comparable meanings were organized into specific categories. Three researchers conducted the analysis independently to ensure that the resulting classification system was suitable and best fitted the data. The software QSR NVivo 9 was used in coding the transcripts of the interviews.

### Results

The initial data analysis revealed 10 categories of data related to the different leagues and 8 categories of data concerning the different teams; for each situation these categories were grouped in 4 final categories.: i) game culture/identity (n=18); ii) strategical-tactical factors (n=17); iii) player characteristics (n=14); iv) coach philosophy (n=14).



*Figure 1. Representation of the aspects that most contribute to each of the football teams' playing style.*

When analyzing the specific characteristics of the three teams, the coaches mainly referred to aspects related to a playing/identity culture of each team that is influenced by their history, their tradition and a set of values underlying the different clubs. The factors that contribute to the development of this identity are of various kinds, based mainly on political ideologies, specific characteristics of the society and by the group of players and coaches who were passing by clubs throughout its history (Györi Szabó, 2011; Hamil et al., 2010).

*“Barcelona has a history and a culture behind that is very difficult to shake and it becomes a critical success factor. The Barcelona of today has a little of Barcelona team of Dinus Michell and Cruyff; this is undeniable. And the club now has established such a solid structure that makes up the teams of those times.” (Coach 1)*

*“Barcelona has a playing culture that starts from a young age, in which players are created and shaped. With Manchester United, there also is a playing culture, but it has a different dimension, because it will continuously adjust depending on the players they get.” (Coach 5)*

Our coaches described each team's differences based on strategic and tactical aspects. Overall, all coaches recognized the quality and merit with which Barcelona plays, basing their views on a ball possession that is very difficult to equal by any other team in the world. In contrast, Manchester United plays in a way where strong ball possession is primary, but also their ability to play quickly and offensively, through a more "direct" playing style. Finally, Inter Milan's style is defined essentially by their defensive tactical rigor and the capacity to develop effective offensive sequences of quick attacks and counterattacks.

*“I think that Barcelona is characterized by a very pronounced positional attack, even with very specific characteristics. The Inter at that time tried to explore the fast attack and counterattack of an obvious way. Regarding Manchester United, I think that if they could develop counterattacks, they played through that way, if they can not, they played in an organized attack. I believe that Barcelona is very pronounced. Manchester United, perhaps was the best team in the three methods of play. Barcelona are clearly a team that plays in organized attack, positional attack.” (Coach 8)*

*“I think that Inter was also a strong team in transitions, FC Barcelona not so much, because Barcelona privileges the domain and control of the game in possession and, for them, the transitions are always safely transitions. As the counterattack requires transitions with a risk, they use them with a high dose of security. When they recover the ball possession, if they have to play the ball to the goalkeeper, they play, ie they believe in the development of their style of play following this path. Probably, from all those teams, Manchester United is the team who play a more complete football because they are so strong in the transitions as in the situations of positional attack or pure offensive organization.” (Coach 6)*

The players that form these teams are only one element that can explain the different ways of playing. As described elsewhere (Kuper & Szymanski, 2010), our coaches feel that the strong and stable economic situation of these teams have allowed

them to have players who are perfectly suited to the game's model, whilst also contributing to an enrichment of the game shown through extremely high playing skills.

*“Manchester United has had the financial capability to contract French, Portuguese, Spanish and South American players. They went looking for players who could bring them the end result without having to necessarily show better game quality. Inter was a highly effective team, it had a mix of players typically Italian, cynical, tactically worshiped from a defensive organization standpoint, or a structural one, with a mix of creative players who bring unpredictability to the game.” (Coach 1)*

*“... If you look at Manchester United team from the the last few years, the problem is when they have or does not have the best players, when they have a player like Cristiano Ronaldo or does not have Cristiano Ronaldo. (...) and also the quality of three or four players that have more ball possession than the others all together (Barcelona).” (Coach5)*

In addition to the players' characteristics, the interviewees mentioned that the philosophy the coach possesses is another aspect that can also influence a team's playing style.

*“Manchester United is a team that has a national manager coaching it, holding a typical English style, both in its essence and in its game philosophy. His experience as a coach led him to create a game concept that is very close to what is seen in the English teams, but more contrasting to the realities of central Europe, like Spain, Portugal, or Netherlands, where primacy for quality of play is paramount.” (Coach 1)*

*“...I think the great worker of that team [Inter] is their coach, someone who can show such strong leadership and objectivity. That is, their playing style was primarily based on someone who knows very well what he wants and what can be achieved with the players he had; a great example of a good symbiosis.” (Coach 5)*

This work studied the aspects that coaches considered more important when describing the Barcelona, Inter Milan and Manchester United, providing novel data for the understanding of the factors influencing a team's playing style. We found that the coaches views go far beyond issues related exclusively to tactical, strategic or technical aspects; i.e. they are strongly influenced by cultural aspects.

Our coaches believe that what distinguishes them are aspects related to a culture of play/identity specific to each team. This is seen in a context that takes into account the clubs' history, which in turn is influenced by factors like politics, culture and the

players and coaches who have been part of the club. Finally, they also referred to the strategic and tactical aspects, the players' skills and the coach's philosophy as aspects that also contribute to differentiating these teams.

Understanding the factors that contribute to the different playing styles in different countries and teams may provide useful information for coaches who want to more efficiently adapt to their new cultures and implement their playing philosophy.

### Aknowledgement

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