

A TECHNICAL PROFILE OF DIFFERENT PLAYING POSITIONS

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The coach's role is to prepare the team for optimal competitive performance. Within modern football, factors such as the increased volume of matches and the need for sufficient recovery from match play can reduce the amount of time available for tactical and technical practice. Therefore, practice time must be used so as to be of maximal benefit to the player. Specificity of practice (i.e. what is practiced corresponds to what is done in competition) enables the players to directly experience situations which they encounter during match play. Previous studies (eg Strudwick and Reilly, 2001, "Insight", Issue 2, Volume 4) have shown that exercise activity patterns vary across the different playing positions. Furthermore, recent research (see Williams *et al*, 2003, "Insight", Issue 2, Volume 6) has demonstrated not only the unique physical demands of different playing positions, but also the varying technical demands.

Table 1 THE TECHNICAL DEFINITIONS EMPLOYED IN THE ANALYSIS

Skill	Definition
Pass	Player in possession attempts to send the ball to a teammate (eg using the inside, outside or instep of foot over short or long distances; using the toe, heel, sole, thigh or chest, using various techniques such as ground, lofted, chip, flick or volley).
Receive	Player gains or attempts to gain control of the ball in order to retain possession (eg inside of foot, outside of foot, sole of foot, instep, toe, chest, thigh, head).
Turn	Player in possession, with ball at feet, changes direction in order to play in other areas of the pitch.
Dribble	Player in possession, with ball at feet, beats or attempts to beat an opponent.
Run with ball	Player in possession, with ball at feet, moves ball quickly across space.
Header	Player contacts the ball using their head (eg diving, pass, attempt at goal, challenge, clearance).
Shot	An action that sends the ball directly towards the opponents' goal in a deliberate attempt to score a goal.
Cross	Player in possession of the ball in a wide area sends the ball into the opponents' penalty area.
Tackle	An action intending to dispossess an opponent who is in possession of the ball.
Interception	Player contacts the ball with some control, preventing an opponent's pass, cross or shot from reaching its intended destination.
Block	Ball strikes the player, preventing an opponent's pass, cross or shot from reaching its intended destination.
Clearance	Player attempts to send the ball away from their own goal whilst defending.
Restart	A dead ball situation resulting from a break in play (eg corner, free kick, corner kick, goal kick).

The present study sought to extend such research by measuring the techniques performed during match play by individual players in different playing positions. Video recordings of six English Premier League matches were used to analyse ten team performances. Each team employed a 4-4-2 playing formation. The frequency of skills executed by a full back (FB), a centre back (CB), a centre midfielder (CM), a wide midfielder (WM) and a forward (F) from each team was recorded using a hand notation system. Where a player was substituted during a match, his direct replacement was used to complete the analysis. Table 1 provides a list of skill definitions used in this study.

The results from this study showed that, when compared to players in other positions, central midfield players performed more technical actions per game. In contrast, centre backs performed less technical actions per game. Full backs and wide midfielders performed slightly less technical actions than did central midfielders, whereas forwards performed slightly more technical actions than did centre backs. All positions performed all skills, apart from the centre backs who did not record any shots at goal.

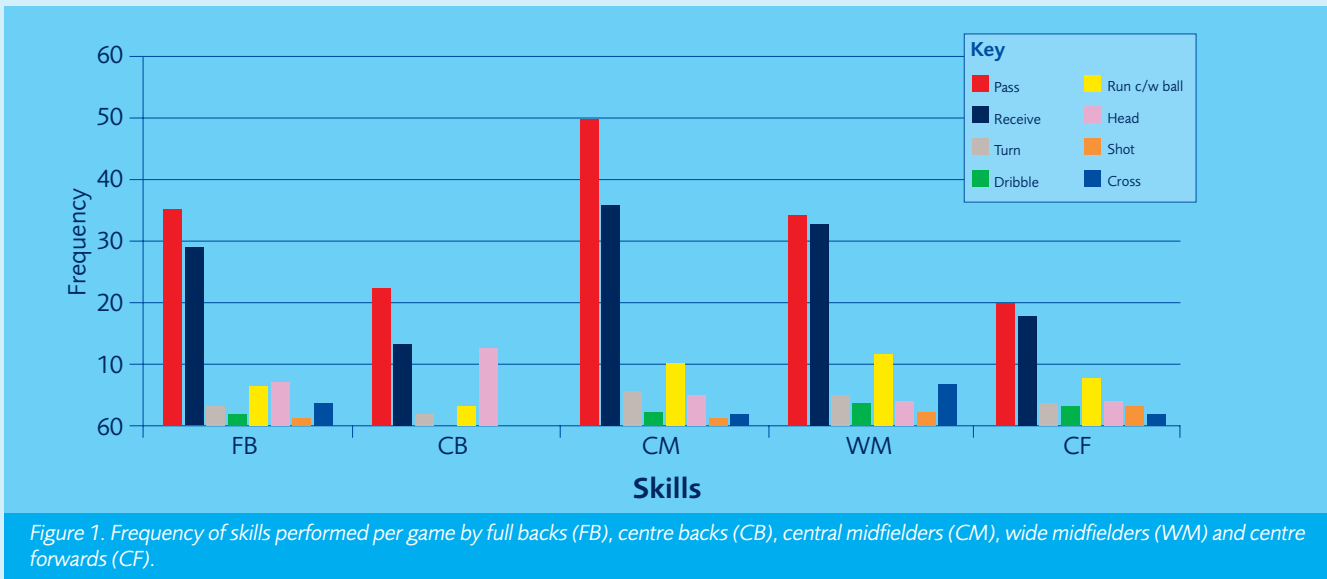


Figure 1. Frequency of skills performed per game by full backs (FB), centre backs (CB), central midfielders (CM), wide midfielders (WM) and centre forwards (CF).

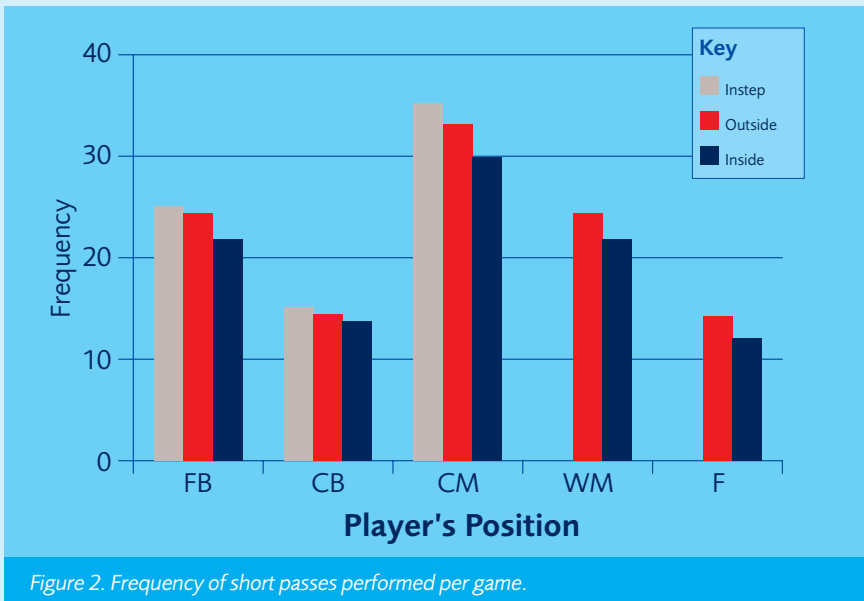


Figure 2. Frequency of short passes performed per game.

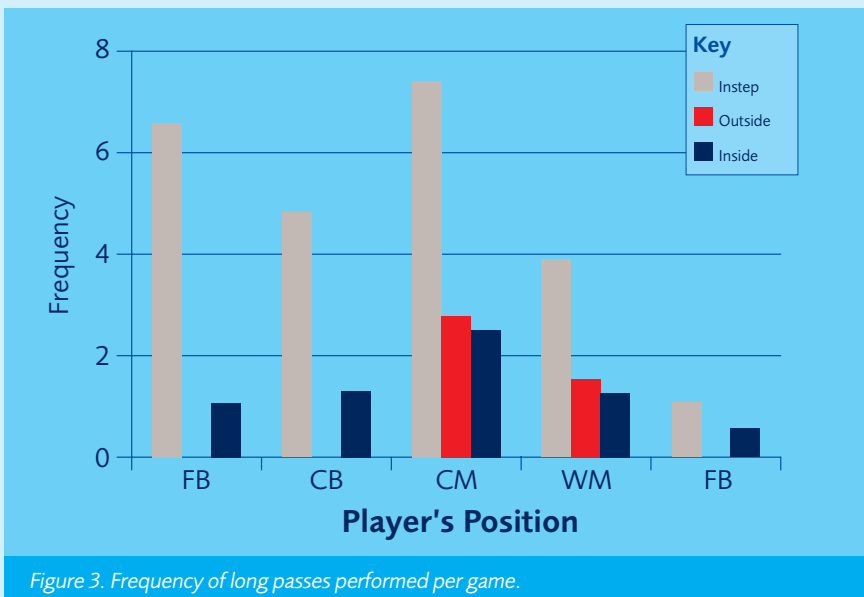


Figure 3. Frequency of long passes performed per game.

Actions when 'In Possession'.

Figure 1 shows that, when their team was in possession of the ball, the players performed the skills of receiving and passing more than they did all the other skills combined. Furthermore, all players ran with the ball more than they performed the skills of dribbling or turning. Central midfield players received the ball more and performed more passes than did players in other positions. As would be expected, when compared to players in other positions, wide players and full backs performed the most crosses, midfielders and forwards dribbled more than did defenders, centre backs performed the most headers, whilst forwards performed the most shots.

Figure 2 indicates that players made the majority of their short passes with the inside of the foot. However, all players made short passes with the inside, outside and instep of the foot. Figure 3 indicates that the majority of long passes were made using the instep, that is, the laces and big toe area of the foot. Midfielders and forwards used the inside, outside and the instep of their foot to make long passes. However, defenders made no passes with the outside of their foot. Wide midfielders and forwards played a variety of other types of passes, such as passes with the toe, than did players in other positions. Moreover, centre backs performed the lowest amount and had the least variety of these types of passes. Figures 2, 3 and 4 demonstrate that all players performed many more short passes than they did long passes and other types of passes.

Figure 5 shows the different parts of the foot used by players to receive the ball. All players used the inside of their foot to receive the majority of balls. However, the results showed that, at some time, each of the five surfaces of the feet (i.e. inside, outside, instep, sole, heel) were employed by the players to receive the ball. Furthermore, Figure 6 demonstrates that central midfield players received the ball more times and using a greater variety of other surfaces (i.e. chest, thigh, head, shin) than did players in other positions. Centre backs never used the thigh or head, and rarely used the shin, to receive the ball. Forwards and wide players did not employ the shin to receive the ball.

Figure 7 demonstrates the different types of headers performed. Centre backs performed the most headers. Centre backs made more headed clearances than players in the other positions performed total headers. Defenders performed more headed clearances and passes than other types of headers (i.e. attempt, challenge, diving), whereas forward and midfield players performed more headed passes. As would be expected, forwards performed more headed attempts at goal than did players in other positions.

Actions when 'Out of Possession'

Figure 8 demonstrates that when their team was out of possession all players performed clearances, blocks, interceptions and tackles. As would be expected, defenders performed the largest amount of defensive technical actions. Furthermore, defenders performed more interceptions and clearances than they did tackles and blocks. Moreover, when compared, Figures 1 and 8 show that centre backs performed as many of these defensive technical actions as they did passes. However, Figures 1 and 9 demonstrate that full backs performed twice as many passes as they did defensive technical actions. When compared to players in other positions, forwards performed the least total and sub-total amounts of defensive technical actions. Central midfield players performed more defensive technical actions than did wide midfielders. However, when compared to their total amounts of defensive actions: (i) wide midfielders received the ball twice as much and performed twice as many passes; (ii) central midfielders received the ball five times as much and performed five times as many passes; and (iii) forwards received the ball four times as much and performed four times as many passes.

Restarts

Figure 9 demonstrates that all players performed restarts apart from centre backs who took no corner kicks. Full backs performed more throw ins and free kicks than did players in other positions. Wide midfield and forward

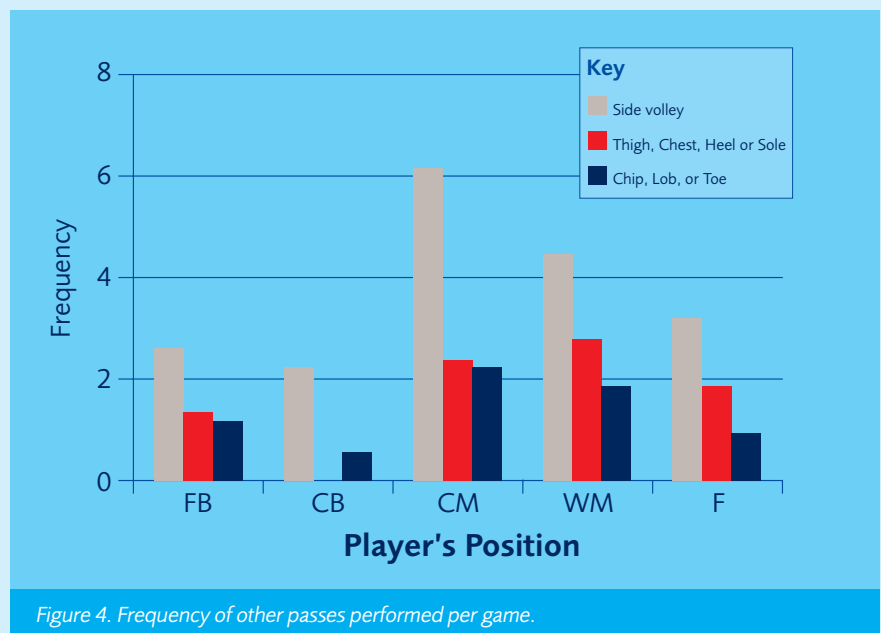


Figure 4. Frequency of other passes performed per game.

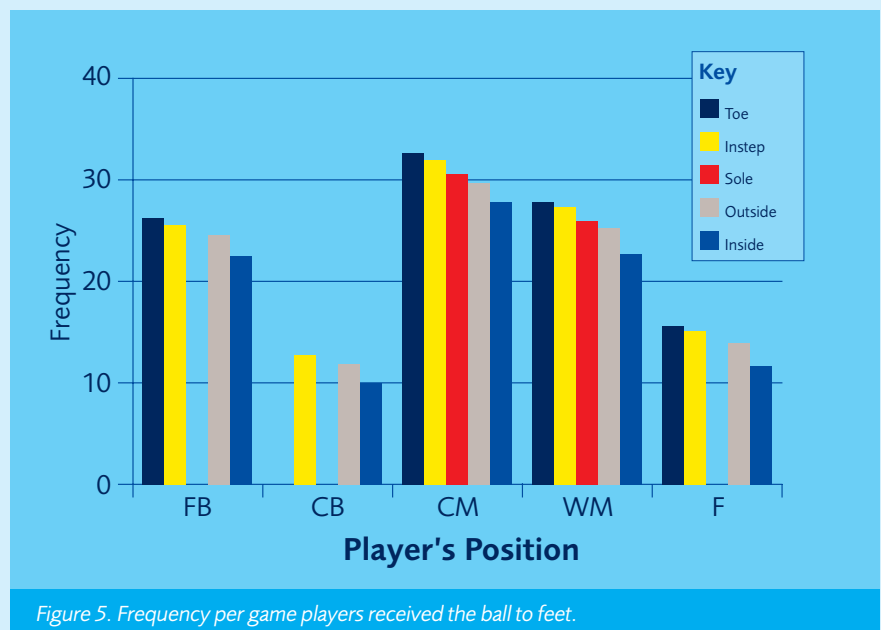


Figure 5. Frequency per game players received the ball to feet.

players performed the least amount of throw ins (these players were likely the recipients of most throw ins). Forwards took the least amount of free kicks. Central midfield players took more corners than did players in other positions.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to measure the techniques performed during match play by individual players in different playing positions. It was shown that, in general, players perform all skills during a match. Furthermore, all players passed and received the ball more than they performed any other skill. However, differences do exist in the technical demands of the various positions. These differences exist due to the areas of the field in which players operate. For example, central midfielders, being the fulcrum

of the team through which play frequently passes, performed more technical actions than did players in other positions. Moreover, certain actions were performed more often by those playing in different positions. For example, when compared to players in other positions, midfielders ran with the ball more, whilst defenders performed more defensive actions, and forwards had more attempts at goal. Other actions were shown to be more specific to a playing position. When compared to players in other positions, centre backs performed more headers; central midfielders received, passed, and turned with the ball more; wide midfielders and full backs performed more crosses; full backs performed more throw ins; and forwards had more attempts at goal. Conversely, some actions were shown to be less specific to a playing position. For instance, when compared

to players in other positions, centre backs dribbled, turned and shot less, forwards and centre backs passed less, forwards performed less defensive actions, whilst full backs dribbled less. Therefore, whilst passing and receiving were dominant actions for all positions, these findings have shown that a player's position on the field often determined which technical actions they performed.

Playing position also often determined the variations of a skill that the player performed. For example, centre backs performed a lower variety and lower total amount of receptions with other surfaces, performed a lower variety and lower amount of long passes, performed a lower variety and lower amount of other types of passes, performed more clearances and performed more headed clearances than did players in other positions. These differences

exist due to the area of the field in which the centre back operates. Centre backs are often more cautious and safe in their play, as a mistake often leads to a goal scoring opportunity for the opposing team. In contrast, midfield players and forwards often take risks with possession in pursuit of a goal. This more adventurous approach was shown in the results. Midfielders and forwards received the ball more times and on a wider variety of other surfaces, performed more headed passes, whilst wide midfielders and forwards were shown to play a wider variety of other types of passes. However, all players mainly employed the inside of the foot to receive the ball, the inside of the foot to make short passes, and the instep of the foot to make long passes. Therefore, whilst variations of a skill are in part determined by playing position, there are

certain variations, which are performed more often, that are common to all positions.

The amount of defensive technical actions the player performs is also determined by player position. A major role of any defender is to stop the opposing team's attacks. Therefore, they operate in areas of the field which protect their goal. Thus, defenders, as shown in this study, perform the largest amount of defensive technical actions. In contrast, the major role of any forward is to create and score goals. Therefore, they operate in areas closer to the opposition's goal. Thus, when compared to players in other positions, forwards perform the least amounts of defensive technical actions. Furthermore, the results also showed that central midfielders performed more defensive actions than did wide midfielders. Modern centre midfield players operate in all areas of the field, often covering the largest distance during a match. In contrast, wide midfielders operate on one 'flank'. Therefore, central midfielders have more opportunities to be involved when 'out of possession'. Thus, when compared to wide midfield players, central midfielders perform more defensive actions. It was also shown that defenders performed more interceptions and clearances than they did tackles and blocks.

Specificity of practice, as described in this study, is already present within most football clubs, where coaches are often employed to work specifically with goalkeepers. Furthermore, certain clubs now employ coaches to work solely with the specific playing positions (eg defensive coach). This strategy has been widely employed in American Football for many years. The findings of this study have demonstrated the need for practice which is position specific. Playing position determines many of the technical actions performed by individual players during match play. However, there are also many technical actions which are performed by all players regardless of playing position. Thus, players should also be given the opportunity to practice these core skills. The main findings of this study are highlighted below:

- All players performed all technical actions; they received and passed the ball more than they did all the other skills combined; they performed the majority of their short passes with the inside of their foot and the majority of their long passes with the instep; performed short passes with all the surfaces of the foot; performed many more short passes than they did long passes and other types of passes; received the majority of balls sent to them on the inside of their foot; performed all defensive technical actions; and ran with the ball more than they performed the skills of dribbling or turning.
- Full backs performed the highest amount of defensive technical actions; performed twice

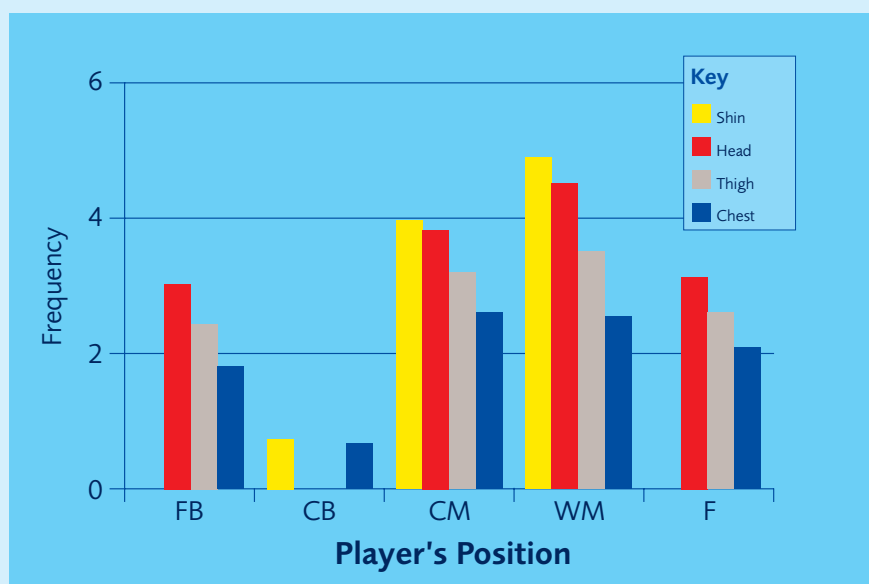


Figure 6. Frequency per game players received the ball to other surfaces of the body.

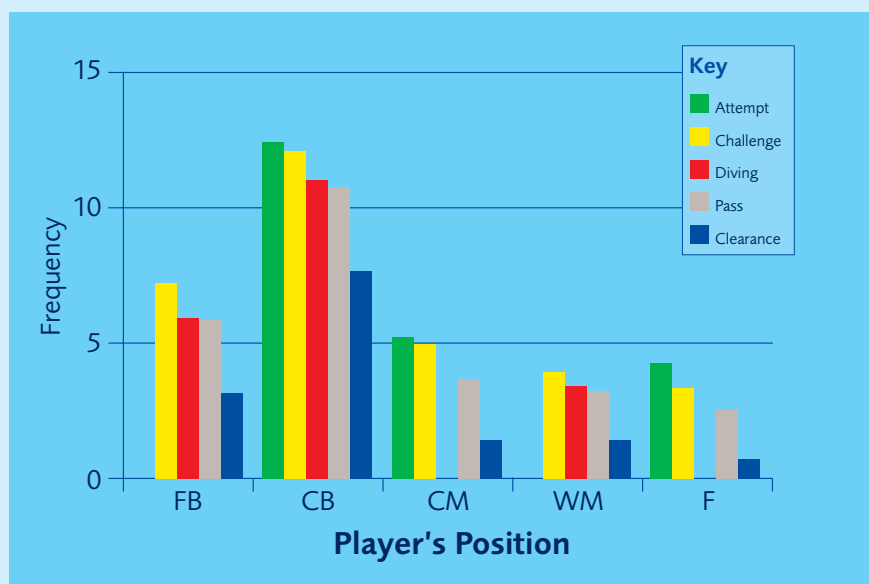


Figure 7. Frequency of headers performed per game.

as many passes as they did defensive technical actions; performed the most crosses, free kicks and throw ins; performed no passes with the outside of their foot; and performed more headed clearances and passes than other types of headers.

- **Centre backs** also performed the highest amount of defensive technical actions, but the lowest amount of total technical actions; performed as many defensive technical actions as they did passes; performed the most headers and headed clearances; performed no passes with the outside of their foot; received the ball with fewer parts of the body; made less other types of passes; dribbled and turned less; and did not shoot.
- **Central midfielders** performed the most technical actions; received, passed and turned with the ball more; used all the surfaces of the foot to receive the ball and make long passes; received the ball on a wider variety of other surfaces; took more corners; performed a wider variety of other types of passes; performed more headed passes than other types of headers, and ran with the ball more.
- **Wide midfielders** performed the most crosses; used all the surfaces of the foot to receive the ball and make long passes; performed a wider variety of other types of passes; performed more headed passes than other types of headers; performed the least amount of throw ins; and ran with the ball more.
- **Forwards** performed more shots and headed attempts at goal; used all the surfaces of the foot to receive the ball and make long passes; performed a wider variety of other types of passes; performed more headed passes than other types of headers; performed the least amount of throw ins; and performed the least amount of defensive technical actions.

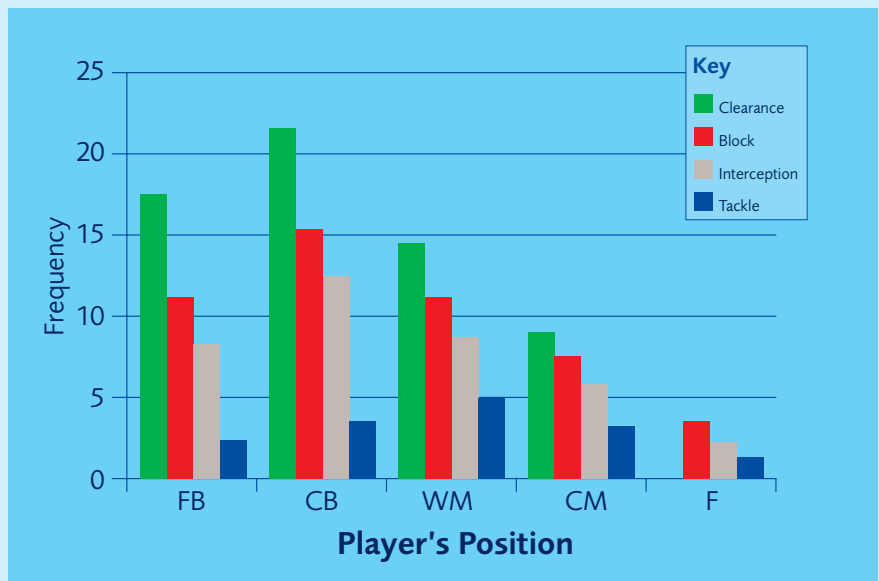


Figure 8. Frequency of defensive actions performed per game.

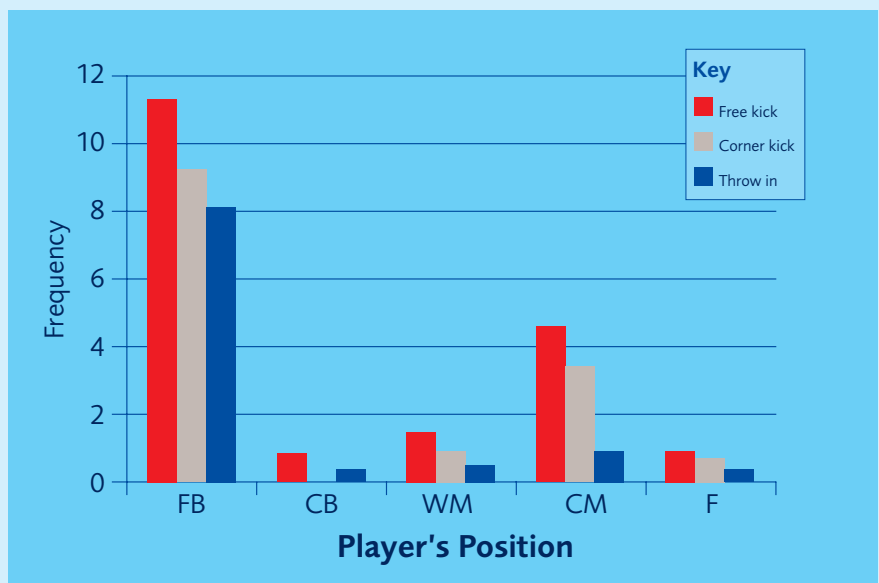


Figure 9. Frequency of restarts performed per game.

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