

SOCCER GIANTS LEARN VALUE OF CRUNCHING NUMBERS TO SCORE

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Madrid – Chelsea and Manchester United, who meet in the Champions League final next Wednesday in Moscow, are among the English Premier League teams recruiting professors and computer wizards to crunch statistics and find the best players as well as to gain an advantage over their opponents.

The stakes are high: the winner of Europe's club championship can net as much as \$160 million (R1.2 billion).

"It is a race," said Simon Wilson, who is hiring six analysts for Manchester City. "The rewards will be great."

Soccer coaches are following the lead of Billy Beane, the general manager of Major League Baseball's Oakland Athletics team, who was featured in the 2003 US best-seller Moneyball. The book detailed how Beane used overlooked statistics to grade players and build a contending club with one of the lowest payrolls in baseball.

Baseball, which centres on the match-up between the pitcher and batter, is rife with statistics. Fans memorise them, websites are devoted to them and historians use them to compare players.

"It is more difficult to dissect soccer, a complex web of passes, headers, tackles and shots by 22 players," said Ed Sulley, who leads a team of six analysts at Bolton Wanderers.

Bolton analysts track statistics such as how long it takes a player to control balls teammates knock to the turf with their heads, where his corner kicks are most likely to go, and the percentage of forward passes he completes.

Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger, who has won three league titles and four Football Association (FA) Cups with the team, receives 60 pages of statistics from Opta Sportsdata after each game, according to Richard Ewing, the sales director at the London-based company.

Chelsea, league champions in 2005 and 2006, was tapping statisticians to bolster its player recruitment strategy, said Mike Forde, the head of the club's performance analysis unit since August. "We've created a model that no one else is using," he said.

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Beane is part of the boom in soccer statistics. A premier league fan and part-time executive for Major League Soccer's San Jose Earthquakes, Beane is working with Leeds Business School professor Bill Gerrard on statistical analysis in soccer.

"The process is just starting and far from any definitives," said Beane.

His approach has not won over everyone in soccer.

"It's a game of hit and miss – and there are more misses than hits," said Jorge Valdano, who was sports director of Real Madrid from 2000 to 2005. Statistics "won't play an important part in the future of soccer". But history suggests he may be wrong.

Charles Reep, a Royal Air Force wing commander during World War 2, influenced English soccer after he began compiling statistics while watching Swindon Town in the 1950s.

He found that goals were more likely after three or fewer consecutive passes. It influenced the style of Wolves coach Stan Cullis, who led the team to three league titles and two FA Cups from 1954 to 1960.

While match-winning formulas may be years away, Bolton's approach is already paying off.

Former coach Sam Allardyce hired Forde, now with Chelsea, as the club's first performance analyst in 1999, and the team finished in the top half of the league three of the past four seasons.

In the early days, Forde focused on issues such as improving nutrition and equipment. Now he is turning to statistics. "We were thinking outside the box," said Forde.

Manchester United is not relying solely on the wisdom of coach Alex Ferguson.

The club bought \$200 000 of video analysis software that tracked things such as passing speed and ball possession, said Philip Jackson, the managing director of Sydney-based Sportstec, the maker of the product.

"Somewhere there is a key factor that can change the game," Jackson said.