

The Effects of Managerial Changes in English Professional Soccer, 1975-1995

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Abstract

The general assumption among the public, players and directors of soccer clubs is that a change of the manager automatically leads to an improvement in results and, subsequently, league position. The aim of this study is to assess whether this popular belief is substantiated. We investigate the correlation between the change of managers and the subsequent match results and league position that football clubs attain. The study focuses on the nature and extent of managerial changes in the four English professional football leagues over twenty years and assesses the implications for football success. Three hundred and three managerial changes and their effects on the league positions of 79 professional English soccer clubs were analysed. To correlate these data, the league position of these clubs was compared: i) five matches before the old manager's contract ended, ii) five matches after the start of the new manager and iii) the league position at the end of the season. It was also assessed whether there are any significant differences with regard to the timing of managerial changes. There was a slight but significant improvement in the league position only while the change of the manager occurred during the off-season or during the first period of the season. Despite these findings, sixty per cent of clubs who tried to avoid relegation by changing their manager were still relegated.

Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, Association Football has been amongst the most popular spectator sports in the world. However, during the last twenty years or so of the twentieth century, football has become a highly commercialised sport. In 1999, the global football business was estimated to be worth some £150 billion, while the world's richest club, Manchester United, was valued at over £500 million (Szymanski & Kuypers 1999). As a result of this rapid process of commercialisation, the chairmen and shareholders at every professional club who finance transfer dealings and who underwrite the financial affairs increasingly depend on successful performance of their teams in order to balance their huge financial input.

Normally, success on the pitch will lead to financial success. More people will pay to get into the matches, more matches will be televised and higher sponsorship deals can be negotiated (Sutherland, 1986). There are several ways of achieving sporting success, the most straightforward of which is to make money available for the acquisition of new players. There is then a need for these expensive players to be effectively coached. Consequently,

professional soccer clubs appoint experienced managers/coaches who are also highly paid. The manager bears the brunt of the responsibility for the club's failure or success. The club may be willing to spend large amounts of money enticing a particular manager, who is regarded as the 'magic ingredient' required for their team's success. Yet, after a relatively short period of time the same person may be removed from the position after a lack of success – such is the fickle nature of the sport.

It has been said that ultimate success, such as league championships or F.A. Cups, is extremely difficult to achieve. After all, more than ninety professional soccer clubs compete for only four English league championships each season. Therefore, it might be more realistic if shareholders and supporters looked at the attributes of their club and set some more achievable or relative goals. This would give clubs a realistic set of expectations and in turn provide managers with a better chance of achieving success (Clarke & Madden, 1988).

Managers, in most cases, are expected to produce good results even when they have no good players (Moes & Maandag, 1993). Yet without the funds to buy new players there will be little likelihood of success. While a new manager may bring new motivational techniques that initially improve the team's results and performance, a particular player's abilities will only improve marginally (Wagg, 1984). Consequently, the shareholders and supporters of a soccer club that finds itself in a financial difficulty and that has little money available for the transfer of players, should not expect too much of their managers. However, these real constraints are generally ignored, and expectations are usually amplified by the media.

This article focuses on the effects of managerial changes in the four English professional football leagues over twenty years. Only clubs that were playing in the professional leagues during this particular period were taken into consideration. The aim of the study is to investigate the correlation between the change of managers and the subsequent match results and league position of clubs under review. Both the long and short-term effects of the change in manager were examined. For the purposes of this study the manager is defined as the person who trains and chooses the team that plays the matches. It is obvious that in most cases the manager's job is much deeper than this, and that, in effect, the manager is also the chief coach, the primary talent scout, the principal media representative of the club and the main motivator of the players. However, some managers will not fulfil all these roles. The term *manager* is a peculiarly British phrase and the term coach may be more frequently used in other countries.

Method

This study used the Rothmans Football Yearbook (RFY) as its primary data source. The RFY has been published annually since 1971. It is the most

comprehensive and reliable publication of football data in the United Kingdom and is widely regarded as the definitive Association Football reference book. Another reason for the use of the RFY is the fact that it has detailed sections that examines each club and their results over the season. In most cases, all the information that was required could be obtained from this source. If any information could not be found in the RFY several contingency plans were used. The first of these was personal correspondence with fifty of the clubs under scrutiny. In many cases the clubs were helpful and supplied the required data, such as the exact date of the change in manager. In some instances, the contacted clubs were unable to supply the requisite information. *The Times* was used as additional source as back issues were easily accessible via the internet. It was only necessary to use this source if there were important holes in the data that could not be filled by either of the first two methods of inquiry. *The Times* was also deemed an appropriate source, given the quality and generally recognised reliability of the information it contains.

Selection of Subjects

This study concentrated on clubs based in England and Wales that had played in the Football League or the subsequent F.A. Premiership since the 1975-76 season. A further limitation required that the clubs had to have remained professional for the entire time under consideration. As a result of these limitations, the number of clubs under review was reduced considerably. In all, seventy-nine clubs were included in this study.

Data Collection

The starting point for the collection of all data was identifying the exact date on which the clubs changed managers. The next stage was to note the league position of the club at that particular time. A five match period on each side of this date was chosen in order to assess the immediate effect the change in managers had on the team's short-term performance. We thus noted the number of points the club had won over the last five games of the old manager's reign as well as the number after five games of the new manager's term. To assess the longer-term performance under the new manager, the club's end of season league position was also recorded,

In many cases, when a manager leaves a club, a long term successor is not appointed immediately. Frequently, a 'caretaker' manager is appointed to run team affairs for a short time. For the purposes of this study, caretaker managers were disregarded unless they were subsequently appointed full-time manager. On occasion, a manager is dismissed during the off-season period. In such cases, the previous manager's data is obtained from the end of the previous season. The data for the new manager are found at the start of the next season.

Statistical Analysis

The analysis used was a t-test of the mean, Initially, it was necessary to divide the data into three parts. All the manager changes within three different zones were recorded and analysed accordingly. These zones comprised: i) Off season, which started from the day after the season ended to the day before the new season began; ii) The first playing period of the season, which period started with the first day of the new season and ended on 31 December; iii) The second playing period of the season, which started on 1 January and ended on the final day of the season.

To help with the coding of the data, a points system was devised, which involved awarding two points for a win, one point for a draw and no points for a defeat. In all, nine t-tests were performed on the data, three tests from each time-zone. The data examined were:

- 1) The previous manager's league position at the time of dismissal against the new manager's league position after five games in charge:
- 2) The new manager's initial league position (after five matches) against the club's end of season league position;
- 3) The points won in the previous manager's last five games against the points won in the new manager's first five games.

Results

Off-Season

There was a significant difference between the league position of the club at the end of the old manager's reign and the league position after five matches with the new manager ($p < 0.05$), and represented a substantial improvement in the club's league position. On average, clubs recovered 2.58 positions on the league ladder. The possible reasons for this apparent improvement will be addressed later.

The next analysis showed that after the first five games there was no further significant change in the club's league position at the end of the season ($p > 0.05$). In fact, the club's league position on average dropped by 0.449 positions at the end of the season to what it was after the first five matches under the new manager. This relationship can be seen in Figure 1, which shows the mean points of all the clubs included in the study for this time period.

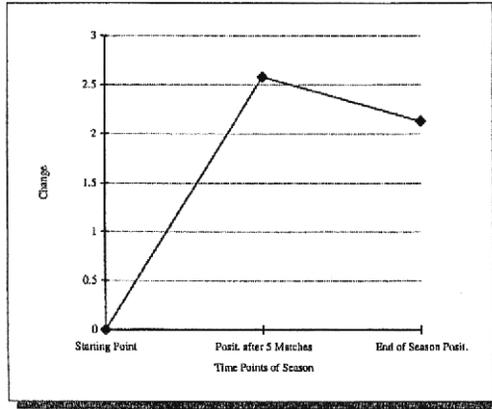


Figure 1: Mean change in league position when manager is changed during off-season.

First Playing Period of the Season

This time period covered approximately the first half of the season. In contrast to the off-season period, the difference in league position of the club after five games with the new manager, compared to the club’s final position under the old manager, was not significant ($p>0.05$). This indicates that there was little or no immediate improvement in the league position. The mean improvement in league position was only 0.327 positions. However, when we compared the league position at the end of the new manager’s first five games to the league position of the club at the end of the season, a highly significant relationship was found ($p<0.05$). Figure 2 displays this relationship. At the end of the season, the club under the new manager had improved its average league position by 1.673 places compared to the position after five matches. This is represented by the movement up to the second point on the graph.

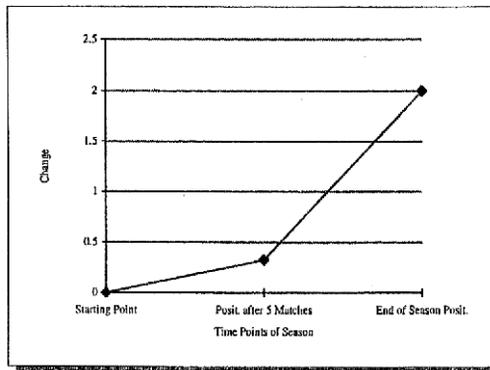


Figure 2: Mean change in league position when manager is changed during first playing period.

Second Playing Period of the Season

This analysis established no significant difference in the position of the club in either of the categories measured. Figure 3 shows that there is a slight improvement immediately after the managerial change, but it is not significant. The improvement after five matches was measured as a mean position improvement of 0.101. This tiny improvement was followed by a slightly bigger one at the end of the season (measured as 0.472 as a mean), although this was also statistically insignificant.

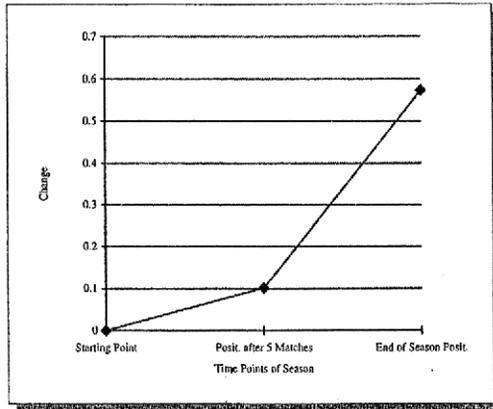


Figure 3: Mean change in league position when manager is changed during second playing period.

Differences in Points

In the next section of the results we specifically examine the points the club won in the last five matches of the old manager's reign and compare this figure to the number of points won in the new manager's first five matches. This will give an impression of the immediate impact the manager has on a club. For the purposes of this analysis, two points were awarded for a win, one for a draw and none for a defeat. Again the data was split into three parts, the off-season, the first playing period of the season and the second playing period of the season.

The off-season

There was a slight increase in the mean number of points won (the mean was an improvement of 0.3 points, the actual mean points won were 4.5 before the change and 4.8 after). There was no statistically significant difference in the number of points won during this period ($p < 0.05$).

The first playing period of the season

During the first part of the season, there was a difference in the mean of 1.2 (the actual mean number of points was 3.17 before the change, and 4.39 after),

which represents an improvement in results. This is illustrated by the fact that the t-test showed there was a significant difference ($p < 0.05$).

The second playing period of the season

In this period the difference in the mean was even more marked (the mean change value was 1.8, the actual points means were 3.1 before the change and 4.9 after), again signifying an improvement in the results ($p < 0.05$). The results of the clubs over an immediate five match period only improve, to a statistically significant degree, during the time when competitive games are being played. The relationships between the means from the t-tests can be seen in Figure 4. This shows the more pronounced improvements in immediate results when a team changes its manager during the season, compared with waiting for the off season. It also reveals a difference as the season continues. This means the amount of time the manager has to improve the team's position decreases.

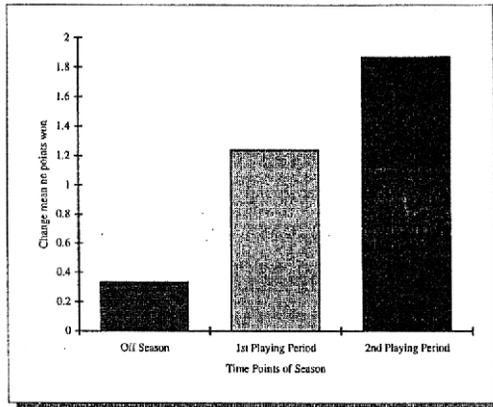


Figure 4: Mean change in number of points gained when manager is changed (all time periods)

Changes Made While a Team is in the Relegation Zone

The First Playing Period

This period recorded the highest turnover of managers when teams found themselves in the relegation zone. In all, thirty-five managerial changes during the first playing period occurred while teams were in the relegation zone. Despite attempts to improve league position by changing managers, twenty-one teams were still relegated. This means that only forty per cent of the manager changes resulted in success, which possibly refutes the notion that managers automatically improve their team's results.

The Second Playing Period

During this period slightly fewer managerial changes occurred. In all, there were 25 changes of managers during the second playing period. Of these 25 changes, fourteen clubs were still relegated. In other words, fifty-six per cent of the clubs in question were unable to avoid relegation despite a change of managers. The relationships between the average figure obtained here can be seen in Figure 5. It shows there is a great similarity between the results of changes in managers when the club is in the relegation zone.

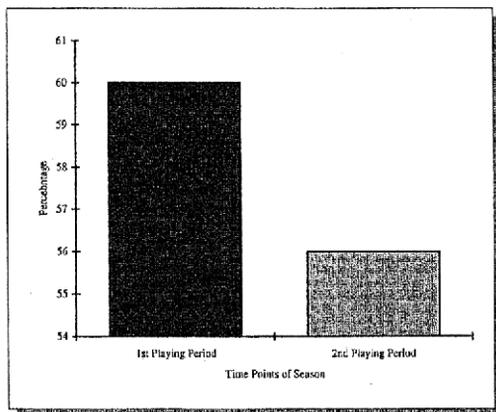


Figure 5: Percentage of clubs relegated after changing manager while being in relegation zone.

Discussion

The 'On Season'

One of the main objectives underpinning this study was to test whether a new manager brings about an immediate and significant change in results. The evidence shows that in some specific cases and at the right time, the appointment of a new manager did lead to an improvement in the team's results. What may be the reasons for this change in the team's performance? There are a number of reasons why a club will be at the 'wrong end' of the table, however, the most important is generally that players are not performing to a high enough standard. A manager can only do so much to improve their chances. When a new manager joins a club, the players are aware that they have to impress him or they could be on their way out of the club. The most likely explanation is that the players try harder in response to new, different stimuli, and that the fresh coaching techniques have some immediate effects.

One of the most interesting findings is that despite the initial improvement in results, there is no corresponding improvement in league position. Although, generally when a team starts winning, it climbs the table, however,

this is not always the case. If a change of manager is made during the season, there is no significant change in the league position of the club, despite an improvement in results. This anomaly can be explained; most clubs change their manager when they are in a poor league position. Perhaps the club is a few points behind the next team. Therefore, to make up even one place the team have to win at least three games out of the five. Such an achievement will only happen on rare occasions as documented in the results section. A more significant improvement would probably take a longer time. The end of season league position is a good indicator of whether or not the change of a manager had any long term effects. The data shows that if a manager is changed in the first period of the season, there is a much higher likelihood that the team will improve their league position at the end of the season compared to what it was after five games under the new regime.

Time is of the utmost importance when our data is being considered. The data indicates an immediate improvement in results, however small it may be. It follows that the more time a team has to work under a new manager, the more matches they will have in which they can document any improvement, thus, the greater their chances of improving their league position. This time factor explains why a manager appointed in the second half of the season does not promote any significant change in league position by the end of the season. A manager who joins a club during this period will not have the time to implement any long term strategies or plans because the club's primary aim is survival. If the club does survive, the following season may be the time to start putting these plans into action.

The 'Off Season'

The data from the off season was considerably different from that obtained for the rest of the season. The most significant difference was that the league position after five matches of the new manager was significantly better than the previous manager's last position. In addition, the data illustrated that this improved position was largely maintained at the end of the season. By contrast, the data also revealed that the number of points gained by the new manager in the first five games did not significantly differ from those gained by the old manager. Many clubs who change their manager in the off season period will do so because they were relegated at the end of the season. Consequently, the first league position to be used in the comparison will be very low. Therefore, it only needs a small improvement in results for this position to improve, especially at the start of the season, thus giving a statistically significant result.

One important finding shows that the league position these clubs achieve after five games with a new manager is maintained until the end of the season. This suggests that the change of manager results in a long term success. The reasons for this apparent success are similar to those stated in the earlier

sections. The manager will have maximum time available to perfect tactics, coaching and motivational techniques. In addition, the period under the new manager will normally commence several weeks before the season starts, allowing the manager to introduce and fine-tune **new** ideas weeks before the first match. Clearly, this is an opportunity which managers appointed at other times in the season do not have.

Changes Made While the Team is in the Relegation Zone

The data show there is little difference between success rates if the club is in the relegation zone and changes its manager during the on-season (either period). Even more important is the fact that if a change occurs while the club is in such a position, the likelihood of the team surviving is only 42 per cent. There is no evidence to support the idea that dismissal of a manager will lead to its survival.

Conclusions

It is generally believed that when a professional football club changes its manager there will be an immediate improvement in the match results of the team and, subsequently, league position. This study shows that this claim can only be substantiated when the managerial change occurs during the on-season. If the change occurs during the 'off season', there is no significant change in the match results of the team. It was found that there was a slight but significant improvement in the league position only while the change of the manager occurred during the off-season or during the first period of the season. Results improved only if the change of manager occurred during the first or second playing period of the season. Despite these findings, more than half of clubs who tried to avoid relegation by changing their manager were still relegated, thereby making the change pointless for a majority of endangered clubs.

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