

# Which World Cup Team Is The Best At Wasting Time?

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Sweden can milk the clock with the best of them. ADRIAN DENNIS / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

If you watched the World Cup these past few weeks, you likely noticed the game that exists within the game. Under most circumstances, when the score is tied, soccer is a simple matter of putting the ball in the net. But once a goal is scored, the shenanigans begin: The leading side typically takes on the task of delaying as much as possible before the referee's final whistle. A player may dramatically embellish an injury, or players could drag their feet whenever and wherever possible.

Last week, [our article](#) on the (lack of) accuracy in stoppage time had one clear takeaway: No matter how long a half actually takes, the ref will award only so much

added time. So players have a clear incentive within the rules to stall play as the clock ticks away uninterrupted. Simply put, the strategy works — and it could mean the difference between winning and losing.

As we amass data by tracking every stoppage during the World Cup, we’re able to see some clear trends. The team leading the match will take longer to perform even the simplest of tasks than the team trailing. Before taking a goal kick, the keeper might continue to gesture for his teammates to go forward, even though they’re as far up the field as possible. A player leaving the match might walk to the sideline slower than most 80-year-olds walk to the mailbox. Or maybe the captain of the squad is being subbed out, but he can’t figure out how to attach the apparently complicated armband to the new captain. These are all par for the course, but how much time do these tactics take up?

We isolated five basic activities for which players control the pace: throw-ins, goal kicks, corner kicks, free kicks and substitutions.<sup>1</sup> Among the 4,529 points of data in these categories during the 48 group stage games, we found obvious differences in speed: Teams that are leading take about 34 percent longer to complete these activities than teams that are trailing.

## Where teams bleed the clock

How long routine soccer actions at the World Cup took in seconds based on whether a team is ahead, tied or behind

	AVG. LENGTH OF TIME (SECONDS)			PERCENT INCREASE WHEN LEADING VS. TRAILING
	LEADING	TIED	TRAILING	
Throw-in	14 . 0	12 . 5	9 . 6	+45 . 8%
Goal kick	25 . 0	23 . 8	19 . 6	+27 . 6
Free kick	26 . 4	23 . 8	20 . 3	+30 . 0
Corner kick	31 . 5	28 . 4	25 . 5	+23 . 5
Substitution	37 . 6	36 . 9	29 . 9	+25 . 8
<b>Combined</b>	<b>22 . 8</b>	<b>20 . 1</b>	<b>17 . 0</b>	<b>+34 . 1</b>

Based on the first 48 games of the 2018 World Cup.

Teams that were tied also took less time on these routine plays than those leading, though it was still more than those trailing. In many scenarios throughout group play, teams have an incentive for the game to end in a tie to nab 1 point — so it

makes sense for those teams to stall. This sample also looks at the entire game, but this time-wasting practice increases as games get closer to the 90-minute mark. When we isolated for activities that occur after the 60th minute, that difference increased to 43 percent for teams winning versus teams that were trailing.

To look specifically at which teams were most adept at running the clock out while nursing a lead, we first needed to eliminate teams that spent little or no time leading in the group stage. For example, defending champion Germany led for only two of the 295 minutes it played — and one of those minutes was spent celebrating the Toni Kroos goal that put it ahead against Sweden. Of the 32 teams in the tournament, 16 had at least 25 combined throw-ins, goal kicks, corner kicks, free kicks and substitutions while leading. Free kicks generally represent the biggest chunk here because they are frequent occurrences that can also include time spent getting a set piece in order.

## The time-wasting leaderboard

How World Cup teams rank in terms of taking the most time to complete routine soccer actions while leading compared to the average time for those actions for all teams, regardless of score

COUNTRY	LENGTH OF TIME (SECONDS) ABOVE/BELOW AVERAGE					TOTAL AVG. TIME ABOVE/BELOW ALL TEAM AVG.
	CORNERS	FREE KICKS	GOAL KICKS	SUBS	THROW-INS	
Peru	+2 . 2	+7 . 9	+8 . 6	+15 . 0	-1 . 9	+6 . 1
Serbia	+11 . 2	+5 . 4	+8 . 8	+20 . 0	+2 . 0	+5 . 7
Sweden	+13 . 7	+2 . 9	+0 . 7	+25 . 0	+3 . 7	+5 . 7
France	+5 . 1	+8 . 6	-0 . 1	+10 . 3	+4 . 2	+5 . 6
England	-1 . 3	+9 . 3	-0 . 3	+11 . 5	+2 . 3	+4 . 0
Senegal	+16 . 4	+0 . 1	+1 . 1	-5 . 3	+8 . 2	+3 . 7
Mexico	-0 . 3	+2 . 9	+3 . 0	+12 . 0	+0 . 9	+2 . 8
Portugal	+7 . 7	+3 . 1	-0 . 1	+4 . 7	+1 . 8	+2 . 3
Uruguay	+4 . 9	+3 . 9	+2 . 3	-4 . 2	+0 . 7	+1 . 9
Spain	-1 . 3	-0 . 2	-2 . 2	+5 . 4	+5 . 0	+1 . 7
Russia	+8 . 8	+4 . 8	+0 . 7	-14 . 8	+1 . 1	+1 . 2
Croatia	+6 . 5	-3 . 1	+4 . 7	-8 . 9	+3 . 3	+0 . 5
Belgium	+4 . 2	-0 . 8	-2 . 8	+9 . 0	+2 . 0	+0 . 1
Japan	+13 . 7	-0 . 4	-6 . 9	-18 . 0	-0 . 6	-1 . 4
Brazil	-6 . 7	-0 . 9	-3 . 6	-3 . 3	+1 . 4	-2 . 0

For teams with at least 25 actions while leading, through group stage only.

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Among the eight teams still fighting to take home the World Cup trophy, France and Sweden have been the most effective at bleeding the clock — taking an average of almost 6 seconds longer per activity than the average for all teams in all scenarios. These two dragged their feet in different ways: Sweden was slow making its substitutions and taking corners, while France was particularly slow on its free kicks and throw-ins. Interestingly, for all the negative attention Neymar and Brazil have gotten for wasting time by diving, the team was one of three in our sample that completed our five routine actions ahead of average pace while they were leading. The team with the fastest tempo while leading, Poland, didn't actually hold a lead until it had already been eliminated from advancing out of the group stage.

Looking at the entire group stage, across all scenarios, there were several moments of epic stalling that deserve mention. When Iran was nursing a scoreless tie against Spain, defender Ehsan Hajsafi took 48 seconds in the 35th minute to simply throw the ball back into play. And when Tunisia was sitting on a 2-1 lead over Panama near the end of its final group match, the Tunisian goalkeeper waited as if he were going to take a goal kick before striker Wahbi Khazri finally came off the field in a substitution — eating up a whopping 103 seconds.

Sweden's opponent in the quarterfinals, England, also earned some clock consumption accolades during the two group stages matches in which it had a lead. Ashley Young took a notably long free kick when he used 95 seconds while the team was beating Tunisia, while Kieran Trippier needed 70 seconds to set up a corner kick against Panama in England's second match. That corner did result in a John Stones goal, giving England the lead, so it was time well spent.

All of this wasted time came in the relative comfort of the group stage. If any of these teams finds itself ahead holding a precious lead in the quarterfinals on Friday or Saturday, expect a master class in the art of clock bleeding.

*Check out our latest [World Cup predictions](#).*

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## Footnotes

1. We didn't look at stoppages due to injury because the length varies significantly based on the

specific injury ... or lack thereof.