

Half-Season 25/26 Tactical & Stylistic Comparison Across Europe's Top Five Football Leagues

An analysis of attacking, build-up, defensive, and disciplinary styles at league level

1. Introduction

Football leagues across Europe exhibit distinct tactical identities shaped by historical trends, coaching philosophies, competitive structures, and regulatory environments. While team-level analysis dominates much of modern football analytics, examining patterns at the league level provides valuable insight into broader stylistic tendencies that influence tactical preparation, and competitive balance.

This project conducts a half-season comparative analysis of Europe's top five domestic leagues: the Premier League, La Liga, Bundesliga, Serie A, and Ligue 1, focusing on attacking quality, progression methods, defensive behaviour, and disciplinary outcomes. By aggregating team-level performance metrics to league averages, the analysis highlights how leagues differ in their approaches to chance creation, build-up play, defensive engagement, and officiating outcomes, while ensuring fair comparison across competitions..

In addition, the use of league position filters are applied to selected visualisations to compare top-performing and lower-performing teams. This allows exploration into whether stylistic differences persist across competitive tiers or diverge among struggling sides. The findings are presented through a series of interactive dashboards designed to support intuitive interpretation.

2. Data & Methodology

The analysis uses publicly available football performance data sourced from FBref, covering the first half of the 2025/26 domestic season (data collected 10/12/2025). Team-level metrics were joined and aggregated using SQL to produce league-level

averages, capturing overarching stylistic tendencies rather than individual club behaviour.

All volume-based metrics were normalised per 90 minutes to ensure comparability across leagues. Key variables analysed include:

- Possession share (%)
- Progressive passes per 90
- Progressive carries per 90
- Non-penalty expected goals (xG) per shot
- Goals minus expected goals (Goals – xG)
- Tackles per 90
- Interceptions per 90
- Yellow and red cards per 90

To explore variation within leagues, teams were categorised using a League Position filter, defined as:

- Top 5 teams
- Bottom 5 teams
- Other teams

This filter enables examination of whether stylistic differences are driven primarily by elite teams or are consistent across league hierarchies. All visualisations were created in Tableau, with consistent colour and symbol encoding across dashboards to aid interpretability.

3. Attacking Quality & Finishing Performance

3.1 Shot Quality and Finishing by League

Significant variation exists in shot quality across Europe's top five leagues. Ligue 1 records the highest average non-penalty xG per shot, while Serie A consistently produces the lowest-quality chances. This gap widens further when isolating top-five teams, indicating that even elite Serie A sides generate comparatively lower-value shooting opportunities. This suggests a structural reliance on shot volume and defensive overloads rather than consistent creation of high-quality chances.

Despite leading in shot quality, Ligue 1 underperforms most strongly in finishing, recording the lowest Goals – xG values. Conversely, the Bundesliga significantly overperforms expected goals, indicating superior finishing efficiency. This result

should be interpreted cautiously, as Bundesliga aggregates may be influenced by the dominance and exceptional finishing output of a small number of elite teams, most notably Bayern Munich.

Overall, these findings indicate that high-quality chance creation does not necessarily translate into superior finishing outcomes. Differences in striker efficiency, shot selection, goalkeeping quality, and tactical context likely contribute to these discrepancies and appear to vary meaningfully across leagues.

4. Creative Efficiency & Build-Up Style

4.1 Progressive Passes vs Shot-Creating Actions

Creative efficiency is assessed by comparing progressive passes per 90 with shot-creating actions per 90. The Bundesliga clearly separates itself, combining high progressive passing volume with the highest shot creation output, indicating strong creative efficiency.

In contrast, Serie A produces a similar level of shot-creating actions despite significantly fewer progressive passes, suggesting a more direct or structured attacking approach. The Premier League, La Liga, and Ligue 1 cluster closely together, indicating broadly similar creative profiles at league level. These patterns suggest that while overall attacking output may appear comparable, the Bundesliga relies more heavily on progressive passing sequences to generate chances.

4.2 Progression Through Dribbling

Progression methods differ notably across leagues. The Premier League and La Liga rely more heavily on ball carrying and dribbling as a share of total progression, particularly among top-performing teams. This aligns with a greater emphasis on individual ball progression and the presence of high-impact dribblers.

Conversely, the Bundesliga exhibits the lowest reliance on dribbling, reinforcing earlier findings that progression and chance creation are primarily achieved through passing. Serie A and Ligue 1 sit between these extremes, blending passing and carrying more evenly.

4.3 Possession vs Progression

When combining progressive passes and progressive carries into total progressive actions per 90, a clear positive linear relationship emerges between possession and

progression at league level. Teams with greater control of the ball generally progress play more frequently, which is intuitive.

However, isolating lower-placed teams reveals more transitional profiles, with some teams achieving relatively high progression despite reduced possession. In contrast, top teams combine high possession with sustained progression. This highlights how tactical approaches vary not only across leagues, but also across competitive tiers within leagues.

5 Defensive Style Comparison

Defensive behaviour is examined using a quadrant analysis of tackles per 90 (reactive defending) versus interceptions per 90 (anticipatory defending).

Clear stylistic clusters emerge:

- Bundesliga teams record high interception rates with relatively fewer tackles, indicating a more positional, anticipatory defensive approach.
- Premier League and La Liga teams exhibit high tackle volumes with lower interception rates, suggesting a more reactive, duel-oriented defensive style.
- Serie A records low values for both metrics, consistent with a deeper, low-block defensive approach focused on structure and containment rather than frequent defensive actions.
- Ligue 1 shows relatively high values in both dimensions, reflecting a more intense and physically engaged defensive style.

These differences highlight how leagues vary not only in attacking behaviour but also in how possession is regained.

6. Discipline & Refereeing Patterns

The final dashboard examines disciplinary outcomes using yellow and red cards per 90 minutes. Yellow card frequencies are broadly consistent across leagues, suggesting similar thresholds for routine fouls.

Red cards, however, display substantial variation. Ligue 1 and La Liga record notably higher red card rates, while the Premier League and Serie A show significantly fewer dismissals. This disparity may reflect differences in refereeing standards, interpretations of serious fouls, or defensive risk-taking behaviours across leagues.

While causality cannot be established, the findings suggest that escalation from fouls to dismissals is not uniform across Europe's top leagues.

8. Limitations & Caveats

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis covers only a half-season, which may exaggerate short-term fluctuations and reduce the stability of observed patterns. Second, league-level aggregation masks substantial within-league variation, particularly between elite and lower-performing teams. While league position filters were applied to address this, not all datasets contained league position information, meaning these filters could not be applied consistently across all visualisations.

Additionally, contextual tactical factors such as pressing intensity, defensive block height, and opponent strength are not directly captured in the data. Disciplinary outcomes may also be influenced by unobserved refereeing guidelines or competition-specific enforcement standards rather than team behaviour alone. Finally, the analysis does not adjust metrics for opponent quality, which may affect the precision of cross-league comparisons.

9. Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that Europe's top five leagues exhibit distinct and consistent stylistic profiles across attacking, build-up, defensive, and disciplinary dimensions. The Bundesliga stands out for creative efficiency and anticipatory defending, while the Premier League and La Liga emphasise dribbling-led progression and reactive defensive engagement. Serie A displays a more conservative, structured profile, and Ligue 1 combines high shot quality with greater defensive intensity and disciplinary volatility.

Together, these findings highlight the value of league-level analysis in understanding footballing identity and provide a foundation for further research into recruitment strategy, tactical adaptation, and competitive dynamics across European football.