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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 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. When considering all teams, the Bundesliga clearly stands out, converting high volumes of progressive passing into the highest levels of shot-creating actions. This indicates a league-wide capacity to translate structured progression into final-third productivity.

However, isolating the top five teams reveals a more nuanced picture, particularly for the Premier League. Among elite sides, the Premier League shifts leftwards and downwards relative to other leagues, combining lower progressive pass volume with comparatively modest shot creation. This suggests that, at the top end, Premier League chance creation is less dependent on sustained progression sequences and more shaped by alternative mechanisms such as rapid transitions, set pieces, or isolated high-impact moments rather than systematic build-up.

In contrast, La Liga and Ligue 1 top teams maintain both high progressive passing and strong shot creation, while the Bundesliga remains efficient but no longer uniquely dominant once elite-only samples are considered. Serie A continues to produce comparable shot creation from fewer progressive passes, reinforcing the interpretation of a more vertical, structured attacking style that relies less on continuous territorial progression.

Overall, the filtered view shows that league-level creative identities persist, but the mechanisms driving chance creation diverge more sharply at the elite level; particularly in the Premier League, where top teams appear less reliant on progressive passing efficiency than their continental counterparts.

4.2 Progression Through Dribbling

Progression methods differ notably across leagues. The Premier League and La Liga consistently exhibit a higher reliance on ball carrying as a proportion of total progression, a pattern that becomes more pronounced when isolating top-performing teams. This reinforces the role of individual ball progression and 1v1 dominance as central creative tools in these leagues.

By contrast, the Bundesliga's low dribble reliance reinforces earlier findings of a pass-heavy progression model and this remains stable across all filters, indicating that its progressive attitude is not merely driven by elite sides but reflects a broader league-wide tactical preference. Serie A and Ligue 1 again occupy intermediate positions, blending carrying and passing more evenly across competitive tiers.

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 the league level. Teams with greater control of the ball generally progress play more frequently.

However, applying league-position filters reveals structural differences. Lower-placed teams cluster more tightly and exhibit more transitional profiles, achieving moderate progression with reduced possession. Top teams, by contrast, separate clearly, combining high possession with sustained progression. This divergence highlights how possession dominance becomes a defining characteristic of elite teams, while progression efficiency among lower-ranked sides reflects more pragmatic or counter-attacking tactical approaches.

Tactical approaches vary not only across leagues, but also systematically across competitive tiers within leagues.

5 Defensive Style Comparison

Defensive behaviour is analysed using tackles per 90 (reactive defending) and interceptions per 90 (anticipatory defending). While clear league-level stylistic clusters emerge in the aggregate view, league position filters reveal how these identities are reinforced or diluted across competitive tiers.

The Bundesliga consistently records high interception rates across all filters, including top and bottom teams. This suggests that anticipatory, positional defending is a structural league-wide feature rather than one driven solely by elite

clubs. The relative stability of this profile implies strong systemic coaching and collective defensive organisation throughout the league.

Premier League and La Liga teams exhibit high tackle volumes, particularly among top sides, indicating an aggressive, duel-oriented approach to regaining possession. When isolating lower-ranked teams, the Premier League's defensive intensity increases whilst La Liga displays a more structured, low block approach, suggesting that defensive behaviour in La Liga is more sensitive to competitive status, whereas Premier League teams maintain a relatively consistent physical defensive identity.

Serie A shows the most pronounced shift across filters. While aggregate values already indicate a low-action defensive style, isolating bottom teams further reduces both tackles and interceptions, reinforcing the interpretation of deep, compact defensive blocks focused on containment rather than active ball recovery. Top Serie A teams marginally increase interception rates, but still remain well below Bundesliga levels.

Ligue 1 displays comparatively high values in both tackles and interceptions, but filtering reveals greater volatility. Top teams combine intensity with anticipation, while lower-ranked teams rely more heavily on reactive defending, contributing to the league's broader physical and disciplinary profile.

Overall, the filtered analysis demonstrates that defensive styles are not only league-specific but also stratified by performance level, with some leagues exhibiting strong stylistic consistency and others showing sharp internal divergence.

6. Discipline & Refereeing Patterns

The final dashboard examines disciplinary outcomes using yellow and red cards per 90 minutes. Yellow card frequencies remain broadly consistent across leagues and across league-position filters, suggesting similar thresholds for routine fouls and general defensive engagement.

Red cards, however, display substantial variation. Ligue 1 and La Liga consistently record higher red card rates across competitive tiers, while the Premier League and Serie A show significantly fewer dismissals. Importantly, this pattern holds when isolating top-five and bottom-five teams, indicating that differences are unlikely to be driven solely by tactical risk among weaker sides.

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

differences in refereeing interpretation, disciplinary enforcement, or tolerance for physical play.

8. Limitations & Caveats

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

First, the analysis covers only a half-season of data, which may amplify short-term variance and reduce the stability of longer-run stylistic trends. While sufficient for comparative insight, results should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitive.

Second, although the analysis primarily operates at league level, this inevitably masks within-league heterogeneity. To mitigate this, league position filters (top five, bottom five, and remaining teams) were applied consistently across visualisations, allowing stylistic differences to be examined across competitive tiers. However, even with tier-based filtering, aggregation may still obscure club-specific tactical nuances.

Third, several contextual tactical dimensions, such as pressing intensity, defensive block height, and transition speed, are not directly captured by the available metrics. As a result, some stylistic interpretations rely on proxy measures rather than explicit tactical indicators.

Fourth, disciplinary outcomes may be influenced by unobserved factors including referee interpretation, competition-specific enforcement standards, or cultural tolerance for physical play. These factors cannot be isolated within the dataset and may affect cross-league comparisons.

Finally, the analysis does not adjust performance metrics for opponent strength. Differences in league quality, fixture difficulty, or competitive balance may therefore influence observed patterns, particularly when comparing elite and lower-performing teams across leagues.

9. Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that Europe's top five leagues exhibit distinct and persistent stylistic profiles across attacking, build-up, defensive, and disciplinary dimensions. Importantly, many of these differences remain stable when isolating teams by league position, suggesting that league identity reflects structural tendencies rather than being driven solely by elite clubs.

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The Bundesliga stands out for creative efficiency and anticipatory defending, while the Premier League and La Liga emphasise dribbling-led progression and more reactive defensive engagement, with greater variation across competitive tiers. Serie A displays a consistently conservative and structured profile, and Ligue 1 combines high shot quality with greater defensive intensity and disciplinary volatility.

Together, these findings highlight the analytical value of league-level segmentation and provide a foundation for applied use in recruitment profiling, tactical preparation, and cross-league performance benchmarking.