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Original Article

Evaluating defensive strategies in football: analysing the impact of defensive metrics on match outcomes

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Abstract:
Football is a dynamic sport where offensive and defensive strategies are crucial in determining match outcomes. While offensive metrics such as goals, assists, and shots on target are extensively analysed, defensive metrics have been less explored, particularly in regional tournaments such as the ASEAN Mitsubishi Electric Cup. This study examines the effectiveness of defensive strategies by analysing key defensive metrics—tackles, interceptions, clearances, goalkeeper saves, and blocks and their correlation with match results. A quantitative research design was employed, using official match reports and football analytics databases to assess defensive performance among winning, drawing, and losing teams. Statistical methods included descriptive analysis, ANOVA, correlation analysis, and regression modelling to determine the significance of defensive metrics in predicting match success. The ANOVA results indicated that clearances showed a statistically significant difference across match outcomes ($F(2,N) = 4.47$, $p = 0.018$), while goalkeeper saves approached significance ($p = 0.062$). Correlation analysis revealed strong negative correlations between match outcomes and goalkeeper saves (-0.97), clearances (-0.96), and blocks (-0.98), indicating that frequent last-resort defensive actions were associated with losing teams. Conversely, a moderate positive correlation was found between tackling success rate (0.47) and match success. The regression model demonstrated a high explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.989$), reinforcing the importance of defensive performance in shaping match outcomes. Future research should integrate tracking technologies and contextual match variables to refine the understanding of defensive effectiveness in competitive football. This study contributes to football analytics and performance optimisation, providing actionable insights for coaches, analysts, and teams seeking to strengthen their defensive strategies.
Keywords: Defensive Metrics. Football Analytics, ASEAN Mitsubishi Electric Cup, Match Outcomes, Tactical Analysis

Introduction

Football is a dynamic and strategic sport that significantly emphasises offensive and defensive play (Khairul Anwar et al., 2022). While offensive metrics such as goals scored, assists, and shots on target are frequently analysed, defensive metrics also play a crucial role in determining match outcomes (Drezner et al., 2020; Nazarudin et al., 2023). The ASEAN Mitsubishi Electric Cup, the premier international football tournament in Southeast Asia, provides an ideal setting to examine how defensive strategies impact team performance. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of defensive strategies by analysing key defensive metrics and their influence on match results. The ASEAN Mitsubishi Electric Cup, formerly known as the AFF Championship, has grown into a prestigious competition since its inception in 1996. The tournament has evolved through various sponsorships, from the Tiger Cup (1996–2004) to the AFF Suzuki Cup (2008–2020) and the current AFF Mitsubishi Electric Cup since 2022. Thailand has emerged as the most successful team with seven titles, followed by Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia. With its official recognition by FIFA in 2024, the tournament has gained greater prominence on the global stage. Given the competitive nature of the tournament, understanding the role of defensive metrics, such as tackles, interceptions, clearances, and blocks, becomes essential in evaluating how teams achieve success. The effectiveness of defensive strategies can influence possession recovery, minimise scoring opportunities for opponents, and dictate the flow of a match. This study analyses defensive metrics and their correlation with match outcomes, providing valuable insights for teams, coaches, and analysts (Nazarudin et al., 2025).

Defensive strategies in football have been extensively studied in various contexts, with research highlighting the impact of specific defensive metrics on match performance. Traditionally, defensive actions such as tackles, interceptions, goalkeeper saves, and blocks have been measured manually. However, with

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advancements in performance analysis, data-driven approaches have become instrumental in understanding the tactical effectiveness of defensive play (Ruan et al., 2023). Teams employ different defensive strategies, including man-to-man defence, zone defence**,** high-press defending**,** and deep-defending (Low et al., 2021). Each strategy has advantages and limitations depending on the tactical approach and match context. For example, high-press defending aims to regain possession quickly by pressuring opponents in their defensive third, whereas deep-defending prioritises maintaining a compact shape to restrict attacking spaces (Shaw & Gopaladesikan, 2020).

Various studies analysing football performance have demonstrated the significance of defensive metrics. Research suggests that man-to-man marking effectively reduces turnovers and maintains possession (Low et al., 2021), while zone defence tends to result in a higher frequency of fouls due to its aggressiveness. Additionally, data envelopment analysis (DEA) has been used to assess the efficiency of defensive strategies, providing insights into optimising team performance. Machine learning models have also been utilised to classify defensive strategies and analyse their effectiveness in different match situations (Dutta et al., 2020). The ASEAN Mitsubishi Electric Cup is a compelling case study for evaluating defensive performance due to its diverse tactical approaches among participating teams. By analysing key defensive metrics across different match outcomes, this study aims to provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of defensive strategies in the tournament.

Despite the growing emphasis on performance analysis in football, there remains a notable research gap concerning the direct influence of defensive metrics on match outcomes, particularly in regional tournaments such as the ASEAN Mitsubishi Electric Cup. While extensive studies have been conducted on defensive strategies in elite European leagues (Miyamoto & Kaneki, 2019; Nazarudin et al., 2024), their applicability to Southeast Asian football remains uncertain. The unique tactical approaches, playing styles, and competitive dynamics of teams in the ASEAN region necessitate a localised analysis to better understand the effectiveness of defensive strategies in this tournament. One of the key challenges in evaluating defensive performance lies in the variability of defensive approaches across teams. Different squads adopt distinct defensive strategies based on their tactical philosophies, the match context, and the strength of their opponents (Fernandez-Navarro et al., 2020). Some teams may prioritise a high-pressing approach to regain possession quickly, while others may employ a deep-defensive strategy to minimise space for opponents. Identifying which defensive metrics influence match success most remains a critical issue that requires further investigation.

Another significant challenge is the lack of contextual analysis in existing research. While numerous studies have underscored the importance of defensive actions, few have explored how match status (winning, drawing, or losing) and venue (home vs. away) impact defensive strategies, particularly in the ASEAN Mitsubishi Electric Cup. Teams may adopt more conservative defensive tactics when leading a match or intensify their pressing when trailing. Additionally, playing at home or away can significantly alter a team's defensive setup, as home teams often exhibit a more assertive defensive posture than away teams. Furthermore, the limited statistical evaluation of defensive metrics remains an obstacle in understanding their precise impact on match outcomes. While key performance indicators (KPIs) such as possession, shots on target, and passing accuracy have been widely utilised in football analytics, statistical models that rigorously assess the significance of defensive metrics such as tackles, interceptions, clearances, and goalkeeper saves are still underdeveloped (Machado et al., 2019). Without robust statistical validation, it is difficult to determine the actual effectiveness of different defensive strategies and how they contribute to match success.

To address these challenges, this study aims to conduct a comprehensive statistical analysis of defensive metrics to determine their significance in influencing match outcomes. By evaluating these metrics in the context of the ASEAN Mitsubishi Electric Cup, the study will offer insights into the tactical implications of defensive strategies, ultimately providing actionable recommendations for teams seeking to enhance their defensive performance in the tournament.

This research seeks to bridge the existing knowledge gap through an evidence-based approach and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of defensive effectiveness in Southeast Asian football. Key defensive metrics are crucial in determining a team’s ability to control the game, prevent goal-scoring opportunities, and transition effectively between defence and attack. Tackling is a fundamental defensive action that enables teams to regain possession and disrupt an opponent's attacking rhythm. Successful tackles are often associated with defensive aggression and midfield dominance, preventing the opposition from advancing into dangerous areas (Klatt & Nerb, 2021). However, poorly executed tackles can lead to fouls and disciplinary consequences, increasing a team’s vulnerability to set-piece threats. Additionally, improper tackling techniques pose injury risks, particularly in high-contact scenarios (Musa et al., 2024).

Interceptions are pivotal in breaking opponent passing sequences and facilitating quick counterattacks. Unlike tackles, interceptions do not require direct physical contact, making them a more controlled defensive manoeuvre. Effective interceptions rely on positional awareness, anticipation, and defensive intelligence to predict passing lanes and disrupt opposition buildup. Teams that excel in interceptions minimise defensive risks while maintaining possession-based dominance. Clearances are an essential defensive technique to eliminate immediate threats near goal areas (Shields & Liu, 2023). Whether executed by defenders or goalkeepers,

clearances serve as a last-resort measure to relieve pressure and reset defensive positioning (Lopez-Valenciano et al., 2022). While clearances are helpful in emergencies, excessive reliance on them can indicate defensive instability or a lack of structured buildup play.

Goalkeeper saves are a primary performance indicator for goalkeepers, reflecting their ability to prevent goals and manage defensive stability. The frequency and quality of saves vary based on team defensive organisation, shot-stopping ability, and positioning intelligence. Goalkeepers who excel in high-pressure situations contribute significantly to their team's defensive resilience. Blocking is a defensive action aimed at obstructing opponents' shots or passes, reducing the likelihood of goal-scoring opportunities (Shields & Liu, 2023). Blocks are fundamental in defending against long-range shots and close-range attempts inside the penalty area. Effective blocking techniques require positional discipline, reaction speed, and physical bravery to prevent opposition breakthroughs (Orkilanda et al., 2024). This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of defensive strategies by analysing key defensive metrics and their impact on match outcomes. Specifically, it seeks to:

a. Analyse the distribution of defensive metrics across different match outcomes.
b. Determine the statistical significance of defensive metrics in influencing match results.
c. Evaluate the tactical implications of defensive metrics on team performance.
d. Provide insights into effective defensive strategies for improving match performance.

Material & Methods

Data Collection and Variables

This study employs a quantitative research design to systematically examine the impact of defensive performance on match outcomes in a professional ASEAN football tournament, focusing on teams competing in the ASEAN Mitsubishi Electric Cup 2024. The dataset comprises group-stage match results, ensuring a structured evaluation of defensive effectiveness across various competitive scenarios. Data were sourced from official match reports and football analytics databases, ensuring reliability and consistency in performance measurement.

The analysis focuses on six key defensive metrics, examining their impact across different match outcomes: win, draw, and loss. This study provides an empirical foundation for understanding how defensive strategies shape competitive success in regional football tournaments by employing standardised defensive performance indicators. The variables examined include:

Independent Variables (Defensive Metrics):

a. Tackles Won – The number of successful tackles completed.
b. % Tackles Won – The proportion of successful tackles relative to total tackles attempted.
c. Keeper Saves – The number of goalkeeper interventions preventing goals.
d. Clearances – The number of times a defender removes the ball from the defensive zone.
e. Interceptions – The number of times a player anticipates and prevents a pass from reaching its intended target.
f. Blocks – The number of times a player prevents a shot from reaching the goal.

Dependent Variable:

a. Match Outcome – Categorised as Win, Draw, or Loss.

Statistical Analysis

By aligning statistical methods with research objectives, the study ensures that defensive performance is examined comprehensively from a descriptive and inferential perspective (Ockta et al., 2024). The following table outlines the relationship between research objectives and the corresponding statistical analysis methods:

Table 1. Research objectives and statistical analysis

Research Objectives	Statistical Analysis
To analyse the distribution of defensive metrics across different match outcomes.	Descriptive Statistics: Mean and standard Deviation for each defensive metric by match outcome.
To determine the statistical significance of defensive metrics in influencing match results.	ANOVA: Assess significant differences between winning, losing, and drawing teams.
To evaluate the tactical implications of defensive metrics on team performance.	Correlation Analysis: Identify relationships between defensive metrics and match outcomes.
To provide insights into effective defensive strategies for improving match performance.	Regression Analysis: Evaluate the predictive power of defensive metrics on match results.

Results

Descriptive Analysis of Defensive Metrics

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 reveal distinct patterns in defensive performance across match outcomes:

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of defensive metrics by match outcome

Result	Tackles Won (Mean)	% Tackles Won (Mean)	Keeper Saves (Mean)	Interceptions (Mean)	Blocks (Mean)	Clearances (Mean)
Draw	12.17	71.25	2.92	8.25	3.25	20.5
Lose	11.79	64.43	4.14	9.57	4.00	23.43
Win	9.93	68.21	2.29	8.57	2.57	13.29

Losing teams exhibited the highest number of clearances (23.43) and goalkeeper saves (4.14), reflecting persistent defensive pressure and a reliance on reactive defensive strategies. Their frequent need for clearances suggests an inability to control possession, forcing them into last-ditch defensive actions. Additionally, they recorded the highest interceptions (9.57) and blocks (4.00), indicating a heavy defensive workload. However, their tackling success rate (64.43%) was the lowest among the three groups, highlighting inefficiencies in regaining possession and disrupting the opponent's attacking plays.

In contrast, winning teams demonstrated the most stable defensive patterns, recording the lowest averages in goalkeeper saves (2.29) and clearances (13.29). This suggests they faced fewer defensive emergencies and had superior control over the game, minimizing the need for reactive defending. Their lower clearance count reflects a greater ability to maintain possession and effectively play out from the back, reducing defensive pressure and dictating the tempo of play. Teams that drew matches displayed a well-structured and balanced defensive approach. They achieved the highest number of tackles per match (12.17) and the best tackling success rate (71.25%), indicating a strong and organised midfield defence. Their ability to contest possession and disrupt opponents more effectively than winning and losing teams contributed to this stability. While their goalkeeper saves (2.92) and clearances (20.5) were higher than winning teams, they were lower than those of losing teams, suggesting moderate defensive pressure while maintaining better control over defensive situations.

ANOVA Results

The ANOVA analysis in Table 3 provided statistical insights into the impact of defensive actions on match results:

Table 3: ANOVA results for defensive metrics

Defensive Metric	F-statistic	p-value
Tackles Won	1.294	0.286
% Tackles Won	1.013	0.373
Keeper Saves	3.000	0.062
Clearances	4.474	0.018 (Significant)
Interceptions	0.260	0.772
Blocks	1.325	0.278

Note: *A p-value < 0.05 indicates statistical significance.*

Clearances demonstrated a statistically significant variation across match outcomes ($F(2, N) = 4.47$, $p = 0.018$), reinforcing that losing teams tend to clear the ball more frequently, likely in response to sustained defensive pressure. Goalkeeper saves showed a trend toward significance ($p = 0.062$), suggesting that teams heavily reliant on their goalkeeper often struggle to secure favourable match results. Tackles won, tackling success rate, interceptions, and blocks did not exhibit statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$), indicating that these defensive actions alone are not definitive factors in determining match outcomes.

Correlation Analysis: Identifying Relationships Between Defensive Metrics and Match Outcomes

The correlation analysis in Table 4 explored the relationships between various defensive metrics and match outcomes, providing insights into how defensive actions contribute to team performance.

Table 4: Correlation analysis

Defensive Metric	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Interpretation
Keeper Saves	-0.97	Teams with more goalkeeper interventions tend to lose more matches.
Clearances	-0.96	Frequent clearances indicate defensive struggles, often leading to losses.
Blocks	-0.98	Higher shot-blocking frequency is linked to poor match outcomes.
% Tackles Won	0.47	Well-timed tackles are moderately associated with better match results.
Interceptions	-0.73	More interceptions are associated with losing teams, indicating defensive pressure.

A strong negative correlation (-0.97) was identified between goalkeeper saves and match results, indicating that teams requiring frequent goalkeeper interventions were likelier to lose. This reliance on the goalkeeper suggests defensive vulnerabilities, such as poor marking or an inability to disrupt attacking plays before they reach dangerous areas. Similarly, clearances exhibited a negative correlation (-0.96) with match outcomes, meaning that teams executing a higher number of clearances were often those under sustained defensive pressure, leading to unfavourable results. While clearances serve as an emergency defensive measure, excessive reliance may reflect a reactive rather than a proactive defensive approach. A strong negative correlation (-0.98) was also observed between blocks and match outcomes, suggesting that teams that frequently blocked shots tended to struggle in matches. This reinforces that successful teams limit their opponents' shooting opportunities through better defensive organisation rather than relying on last-ditch interventions.

Conversely, a moderate positive correlation (0.47) was found between the percentage of successful tackles and match performance. This suggests that teams executing well-timed tackles, rather than engaging in unnecessary challenges, were more likely to succeed. Lastly, a negative correlation (-0.73) between interceptions and match outcomes indicates that teams making more interceptions were often on the losing side. This may imply that such teams suffered sustained attacking threats, necessitating frequent defensive interventions.

Regression Analysis: Evaluating the Predictive Power of Defensive Metrics on Match Outcomes

A linear regression model was employed to determine whether defensive performance metrics could predict match results. The model accounted for variables such as tackles won, % tackles won, keeper saves, interceptions, blocks, and clearances.

Table 5: Regression analysis

Defensive Metric	Beta Coefficient (β)	p-value	Interpretation
Keeper Saves	-0.5075	0.172	More goalkeeper interventions reduce the likelihood of winning.
Clearances	-0.0678	0.242	Excessive clearances indicate a team under high defensive pressure.
Tackles Won	-0.1346	0.673	The number of tackles alone does not strongly predict match success.
% Tackles Won	0.0749	0.408	Well-executed tackles contribute positively to match results.
Model R^2	0.989	-	Defensive performance explains 98.9% of match outcome variation.

Table 5 shows the significant role of defensive performance in determining match outcomes. The model demonstrated a high degree of fit, with an R-squared value of 0.989, indicating that 98.9% of the variation in match results could be explained by the defensive metrics analysed. This suggests that defensive effectiveness is a critical factor in shaping the outcome of matches. Despite the strong model fit, the individual defensive variables exhibited varying degrees of influence on match success. Among the key predictors, keeper saves (coefficient = -0.5075, $p = 0.172$) showed a negative association with winning likelihood, although it was not statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. This finding suggests that teams requiring more goalkeeper interventions may struggle to secure victories, as frequent saves indicate defensive vulnerability. Similarly, clearances (coefficient = -0.0678, $p = 0.242$) were linked to a reduced probability of winning, reinforcing the notion that teams forced into frequent defensive clearances may be experiencing sustained pressure, limiting their ability to control the game.

The analysis also examined the impact of tackles won (coefficient = -0.1346, $p = 0.673$) on match success. The negative coefficient suggests that more tackles alone do not necessarily correlate with better performance, highlighting the importance of defensive positioning and tactical discipline over sheer tackle

volume. However, the percentage of tackles won (coefficient = 0.0749, p = 0.408) exhibited a positive relationship with match outcomes, indicating that defensive efficiency, rather than the total number of tackles, contributes more meaningfully to success. Overall, while the model confirms the substantial influence of defensive performance on match outcomes, the findings emphasize that raw defensive actions alone do not guarantee success. Instead, defensive quality and situational effectiveness, such as well-timed tackles and limiting the need for reactive defensive interventions, appear to be more critical in determining match results.

Discussion

Distribution of Defensive Metrics Across Different Match Outcomes

The analysis revealed distinct defensive patterns among winning, drawing, and losing teams. Losing teams frequently relied on defensive clearances and goalkeeper saves, indicating they were under significant pressure from opponents. This aligns with previous research suggesting that teams forced into frequent defensive actions struggle to control possession and impose their style of play (Shields & Liu, 2023). In contrast, winning teams demonstrated more composed defensive performances, requiring fewer clearances and saves, reflecting a more structured and organized defensive approach. Teams that secured draws exhibited strong midfield defensive engagement, reflected in their ability to win more tackles and achieve a high tackling success rate (Nazarudin et al., 2024b). This suggests that a well-structured midfield defence can prevent opposing teams from dominating possession and launching effective attacks. However, engaging in more tackles does not necessarily translate to better performance. Instead, well-timed and precisely executed tackles appear more valuable in influencing match outcomes.

Significance of Defensive Metrics in Influencing Match Outcomes

Among the defensive metrics analysed, clearances emerged as a crucial factor distinguishing between winning and losing teams. Frequent clearances indicate that a team struggles to cope with opposition attacks, reinforcing that excessive reliance on reactive defending can be detrimental (Fernandez-Navarro et al., 2020). While clearances serve as an immediate way to relieve defensive pressure, they also highlight a lack of control in building play from the back (Herold et al., 2022). Goalkeeper saves showed a trend toward influencing match results, reinforcing that teams relying heavily on their goalkeeper to make multiple saves are often at a competitive disadvantage. This is consistent with findings that suggest strong defensive teams prevent goal-scoring opportunities rather than depending on last-line goalkeeping interventions. Tackles won, on the other hand, did not significantly impact match outcomes, suggesting that the total number of tackles alone is not a defining factor in success (Nazarudin et al., 2024b). However, winning tackles efficiently, rather than engaging in excessive defensive challenges, is more important in determining a team's defensive stability.

Tactical Implications of Defensive Metrics on Team Performance

The findings suggest that defensive performance in football is not about how many defensive actions a team engages in, but how effectively those actions are executed within the match context (Freitas et al., 2023). Teams that required frequent goalkeeper interventions and clearances often struggled defensively, reinforcing that a reactive defensive approach is less practical than a proactive one (Shaw & Gopaladesikan, 2020). The correlation between defensive efficiency and match outcomes suggests that teams should prioritise structured defensive organisation rather than relying on last-ditch interventions. Teams with a disciplined defensive structure, capable of preventing attacks before they develop into goal-scoring threats, are more likely to perform successfully (Nazarudin et al., 2024b). Additionally, the role of tackling success in determining match results highlights the need for teams to focus on defensive timing and positioning (Klatt & Nerb, 2021). Rather than increasing the number of tackles, teams should ensure that tackles are executed effectively to prevent unnecessary fouls and disruptions in defensive structure (Low et al., 2021).

Insights into Effective Defensive Strategies for Match Success

Based on the findings, several key defensive strategies emerge as critical for improving match performance:

a. Minimising the Need for Last-Resort Defending

One key principle of effective defence is preventing goal-scoring opportunities before they develop rather than relying on last-minute interventions such as desperate clearances or goalkeeper saves. Teams that depend excessively on their goalkeeper to make multiple saves often exhibit defensive vulnerabilities that expose them to sustained pressure from opponents. Instead, defensive efforts should be directed towards proactive positioning, intelligent marking, and pressing strategies that disrupt attacking plays early and prevent opponents from reaching dangerous areas. Moreover, excessive clearances can indicate defensive instability, as they often reflect a team under pressure rather than one in control of play. While clearances serve as an emergency measure to relieve pressure, an overreliance on them can hinder a team's ability to transition effectively into attack. Improving defensive composure under pressure enables players to make more controlled decisions, allowing the team to retain possession and initiate structured counterattacks rather than conceding territory to the opposition (Shields & Liu, 2023).

b. Enhancing Defensive Efficiency Over Volume
While tackling is a fundamental aspect of defence, making numerous tackles does not necessarily equate to defensive success. Instead, tackling efficiency and accuracy is more crucial in determining how effective a team's defensive efforts are. Many tackles may indicate defensive aggression, but poorly timed or unnecessary tackles can lead to fouls, breaking the team's defensive shape and providing the opposition with dangerous set-piece opportunities. Therefore, training should prioritise tackling technique, precision, and decision-making, ensuring that defensive interventions occur at the right moments rather than being used as a default response. Beyond tackling, defensive intelligence is essential for reducing the need for reactive defending. Defenders who anticipate opponent movements and read the game well can position themselves more effectively to intercept passes and prevent attacking threats before they develop (Low et al., 2021). By enhancing positional awareness and understanding opposition tendencies, teams can neutralise threats more efficiently while maintaining defensive structure.

c. Adapting Defensive Strategies to Match Context
Football matches are dynamic, and a one-size-fits-all defensive approach is rarely practical. Instead, teams must adapt their defensive strategies based on the match context, including game status (winning, drawing, or losing) and venue (home or away). When a team is in the lead, adopting a compact defensive setup may be the most effective approach to restrict the opposition's attacking spaces and force them into making mistakes (Shaw & Gopaladesikan, 2020). A well-structured defence in such situations prioritises maintaining shape and reducing gaps between defensive lines to prevent the opposition from finding openings. Conversely, when a team is trailing, a high-pressing strategy can be more beneficial in regaining possession quickly and disrupting the opposition's buildup play (Low et al., 2021). High pressing involves applying immediate pressure on opponents in their defensive third, forcing errors, and creating opportunities for quick transitions (Eusebio et al., 2024). However, this approach requires cohesive pressing movements and a high level of defensive coordination to prevent gaps that counterattacks can exploit. The ability to adjust defensive intensity based on match situations ensures that teams maintain strategic flexibility and optimise their defensive approach throughout the game.

d. Strengthening Defensive Cohesion and Communication
Effective defensive performance is not just an individual effort; it requires strong coordination and communication among all defensive players, including defenders, midfielders, and even forwards contributing to defensive phases. When defenders and midfielders operate cohesively, they can reduce reliance on reactive defending and maintain a more organized defensive structure. This involves constant communication, coordinated movements, and ensuring that defensive responsibilities are clearly defined. Different marking strategies also play a role in defensive cohesion. Man-to-man marking can enhance defensive stability by reducing turnovers and ensuring close marking of key attacking players (Low et al., 2021). However, this strategy requires high defensive discipline and awareness to track movements effectively. On the other hand, zone defence relies on structured defensive movements within specific areas of the pitch, which can effectively limit space for the opposition but may lead to more fouls if players are not well-coordinated in their defensive duties.

Conclusion

This study provides compelling empirical evidence on the significance of defensive performance in shaping match outcomes during the ASEAN Mitsubishi Electric Cup. By integrating statistical analysis across multiple defensive metrics, including tackles, interceptions, clearances, goalkeeper saves, and blocks, the research underscores a critical shift from evaluating defensive actions in isolation to assessing their situational efficiency and tactical relevance. Key findings revealed that clearances and goalkeeper saves negatively correlated with successful match outcomes, indicating that reactive, last-line defending often signals tactical instability. Conversely, a moderate positive correlation between tackling efficiency and match success suggests that well-timed, strategic interventions, rather than high tackle volume, are more indicative of effective defending. The regression model further confirmed that defensive performance explains 98.9% of match result variance, emphasising the strong predictive power of defensive metrics when analysed collectively.

From a practical standpoint, these findings offer actionable insights for football coaches, analysts, and technical staff. Teams aiming for sustained success should prioritise defensive composure, positional discipline, and proactive ball recovery strategies over reliance on emergency actions such as blocks and clearances. Defensive drills should emphasise decision-making under pressure, tackling accuracy, and zone discipline. Additionally, defensive tactics must be adaptive to match status e.g., compact low blocks when leading, and coordinated pressing when trailing. This research informs talent development and performance management systems at an organisational level. Clubs and national teams can use defensive efficiency metrics as performance indicators in scouting, player evaluation, and match planning. Furthermore, these insights can support data-driven coaching certifications and defensive curriculum design tailored to Southeast Asian football contexts.

This study extends current understanding in football analytics by contextualising defensive performance within match outcome frameworks, particularly in under-researched regional competitions. The research

supports theories of contextual tactical behaviour and situational awareness in performance analysis by shifting the focus from isolated defensive acts to their frequency, timing, and efficiency in relation to match dynamics. Moreover, the findings contribute to bridging the research gap between elite European leagues and emerging ASEAN tournaments, offering a culturally and competitively relevant lens to tactical evaluations.

Given the complex nature of defensive strategy, future studies should:

a. Integrate tracking data and heat maps to capture spatial positioning and movement coordination.
b. Investigate the influence of contextual factors, such as opponent quality, venue, and in-game momentum shifts.
c. Explore longitudinal performance patterns across tournament stages, assessing how defensive strategies evolve under knockout versus group-stage pressure.
d. Assess interactions between defensive and offensive transitions, particularly how defensive recovery contributes to counterattacking success.

In conclusion, this study confirms that match success in football hinges not merely on the volume of defensive actions but on the efficiency, context, and tactical coherence of those actions. Elevating defensive intelligence, adapting strategy to match demands, and emphasising proactive over reactive defending are pivotal in modern competitive football, particularly within the rapidly evolving landscape of Southeast Asian tournaments.

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