

## THE INFLUENCE OF PLAYERS' AND COACHES' EXPERIENCE ON THE RESULTS IN FOOTBALL

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the impact of the competitive experience of football players and coaches in the Champions League on the results achieved in that competition. The analysis included all the coaches who led their teams in the group stage of this competition (34) and all the players who had at least one appearance (578), in the 2019/2020 season. The experience was assessed on the basis of length of service in the club, the number of appearances in previous seasons in the Champions League competition, namely: in the current and the previous club, in the role of a player who starts the match, comes off the bench or sits on the bench. The experience of the coach was assessed on the basis of career duration, length of service in the club, the number of matches in the competition with the current and previous clubs. The results showed that the playing experience in the Champions League is important for achieving results in this competition. The previous appearances in the starting lineup ( $p < 0.001$ ) especially with the current club ( $p < 0.001$ ) are the most valuable. When it comes to coaches, there is no significant difference between the coaches whose teams managed to qualify in the TOP16 and those who did not, in terms of previous competitive experience. However, what is evident is a slightly higher total number of matches in this competition that the coaches of TOP16 teams had with the previous teams. It can be concluded that previous competitive experience is very important, especially for players, and that it correlates with the number of minutes spent in active play. The findings of this research could be applied in the process of selecting football players for the competition.

**Key words:** CHAMPIONS LEAGUE / PLAYERS / COACH / RESULT / EXPERIENCE /

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## INTRODUCTION

Success in modern, top-class sport is defined by results achieved in competitions. Football, as the biggest sport in the world, and by analogy the most popular, gets its club and national team heroes in numerous continent and world level competitions. When it comes to club football, the Champions League is the most prestigious competition in the world, and therefore the Champions League trophy represents the biggest challenge for all participants, these being the best teams in national championships (Lago-Penas et al., 2011).

Achieving results in football, at the senior level, is a product of quality preparation of football players in terms of technique, tactics, physical, psychological and theoretical preparation (Janković et al. 2016). The methods of preparing football players change over time in line with the evolution of the game itself, which is increasingly characterized by highly intensive activities and shorter decision-making time (Wallace & Norton, 2014; Bradley et al., 2016). Player selection process means choosing those who can meet the demands of the game on the physical level. Skills development methods are largely standardized. Technically trained players are a necessity at the top level, while choosing a tactical game plan is a matter of the coach's decision. Therefore, the field of psychological preparation remains an area that can significantly influence the outcome, either on an individual or team level. In this regard, players are required to be mentally strong, focused, motivated and stable during the competition, so that an external factor, above all, does not affect their performance.

Research has confirmed that mentally strong athletes have a high degree of self-confidence, and as such, can remain relatively immune to the influence of external factors, such as the competition among players, the importance of the game, the result, unforeseen circumstances (Clough et al., 2002). In addition, research in developmental psychology has shown that the age of athletes affects self-perception, emotional reactions, motivation, and the degree of social influence (Weiss, 2004). The influence of a player's age is reflected in older athletes' ability to better control emotions, in a higher degree of motivation and a more rational approach in preparing for the competition. For this reason, Nichols et al. (2009) suggest that the age of the athlete, as well as the experience, that is, the time spent playing a certain sport, could influence a strong sports mindset. Therefore, in football, one could speak more precisely about competitive experience as a key factor in the development of a strong mindset, which generates all the cognitive and conative abilities of football players (Connaughton et al., 2008).

The experience of a football player can be viewed as his age, but also as the number of appearances in a certain competition. Practice has shown that, in this regard, football teams differ strategically and are divided into development-oriented and competitive ones. As the Champions League is a competition where the competitive aspect is the most prominent one, the teams are designed so that experienced players are the protagonists of the game. However, the analyses have shown that when it comes to experience, primarily the age of the players, an important factor is the moment when the performance of football players starts to decline. This threshold for goalkeepers is the age of 33, for defensive players 32, for midfielders 31 and for attackers 30 (Poli et al., 2021). Also, the continuity of the playing team, i.e., a small number of changes in transfer windows, is an important factor that positively affects the result (Poli et al., 2021). The question arises, whether and in what way the experience of playing in a certain competition, in different roles, affects the result that the team achieves. The studies that investigated the influence of various factors on the results confirmed that many factors influence the achievements in football, from the game venue, the status or importance of the match, the quality of the opponent, the influence of the audience and the environment, to statistical indicators that show the

efficiency of certain technical-tactical elements performance (Winter, C. & Pfeiffer, M. 2015; Almeida et al., 2014; Evangelos et al., 2014).

The role of football coaches through the evolution of the football game is clearly positioned as one of the most important factors in achieving results in football. Compared to players, coaches do not have a clearly determined age limit and it is not uncommon for teams in the Champions League to be led by experts over 70 years old. However, in practice, it happens that coach changes are much more frequent in situations where there is no result, so coaches hardly manage to achieve continuity of work, as is the case with players. Research has shown that changing coaches brings a positive effect in terms of results, but in the short term, so clubs, especially those without a clear strategy, often resort to such measures (Paola et al., 2012; Lagos-Penas, 2010; Gomez et al., 2021). Through previous practice and analysis of the most important competitions in football, it has been shown that coaches with a certain rating, defined through results in the previous 10 years, have a significant impact on the results of the teams they lead (Maderer et al., 2014). However, there is no data on whether and in what way the continuity and experience of the coach's work in a certain competition, especially with the team he is already leading, has an impact on the team's results.

The competitive experience can be viewed from several perspectives. During one season, football teams compete in several competitions, the players have different roles in the team structure, the competitions have different challenges and goals. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to examine the influence of the competitive experience of football players and coaches in the Champions League competition on the achieved result. Based on the results of previous research and direct practice, it is assumed that the previous competitive experience of playing in and leading teams will have a significant impact on the results. In particular, the impact of playing in the starting line-up and in the club where the player currently plays is expected to be significant.

The importance of this research can be seen from both theoretical and practical aspect. However, the main value of this paper is in the process of selecting players for the competitions that carry the biggest challenges, and thus the biggest responsibilities.

## **METHODS**

### **Research sample**

For the purposes of this research, the previous experience of a total of 34 coaches ( $51.4 \pm 8.5$  years old), who led their teams in the Champions League football competition in the 2019/2020 season, was analyzed. The same protocol was used for all football players who participated in the competition, a total of 578 players ( $26.6 \pm 1.5$  years old). The research included the experience of every football player who was at least once in the official protocol for a match in the 2019/2020 Champions League season.

### **Variables sample and collection method**

The experience of coaches and football players was analyzed until the start of the competition in the 2019/2020 season, in order to more precisely determine its impact on the achieved result in the upcoming competition. Based on the set goal, variables related to coaches and players were separately monitored. Therefore, the trainer's experience was evaluated based on the following variables:

- Duration of coaching career;
- Tenure in the position of the head coach in the club;
- Total number of games in the Champions League;

- Number of games in the Champions League in the current club;
  - Number of games in the Champions League in previous clubs;
- Players' previous experience was assessed based on the following variables:
- Player's tenure in the club;
  - Total number of games in the Champions League;
  - Number of games in the Champions League in the current club;
  - Number of games in the Champions League in previous clubs;
  - Number of games in the Champions League in the current club, in which the player appeared in the starting lineup;
  - Number of games in the Champions League in the current club, in which the player came off the bench;
  - Number of games in the Champions League in the current club, in which the player was on the substitutes' bench;
  - Number of games in the Champions League in previous clubs, in which the player appeared in the starting lineup;
  - Number of games in the Champions League in previous clubs where the player came off the bench;
  - Number of games in the Champions League in previous clubs where the player was on the bench.

The collection of data related to the monitored variables was conducted using the website <https://www.transfermarkt.com/> Based on the selected variables, the data were entered into an excel file for further statistical processing. In addition to the already mentioned dependent variables, the results related to the football players' and coaches' experience were also ranked in relation to two independent variables, namely, the teams that passed the group stage (TOP 16) and the teams that did not pass the group stage of the competition (Group Stage).

### **Data processing**

Each variable was processed using standard descriptive statistics (mean value and standard deviation). The examination of differences between two independent variables was performed using the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples. The level of statistical significance was at  $p < 0.05$  and  $p < 0.001$ . All statistical tests were processed using the SPSS 20.0 program (SPSS INC Chicago, IL). The results are presented tabularly and graphically.

### **RESULTS**

The results of this research have shown that, when it comes to players, previous competitive experience has a significant impact on the team's placement in the knockout stage of the competition. More precisely, the teams that had footballers with significantly more appearances in the Champions League competition managed to pass the group stage of the competition (Table 1). However, it is important to highlight the fact that the more successful teams had players with a somewhat longer tenure in the current club (2.79 vs 2.06 years), but also, a greater number of appearances in the Champions League with the current club ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 1.** Players' previous experience represented by age, tenure in the club and the number of Champions League appearances.

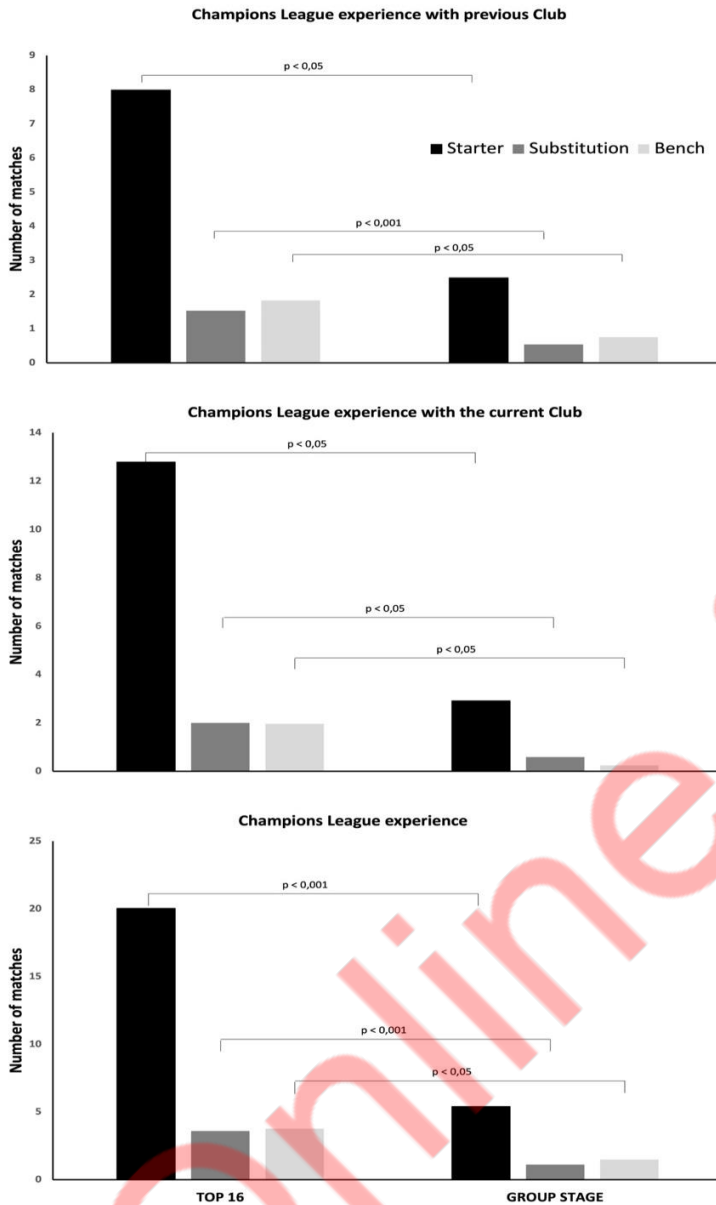
	Players		U test.
	TOP 16	Group Stage	
Age	26,74	26,29	0,407
Club member (years)	2,79	2,06	0,009
Total CL matches	27,35	8,04	0,000
CL current club	16,03	4,26	0,001
CL previous clubs	11,33	3,78	0,001

Statistically, previous experience of coaches who led their clubs, especially in the Champions League competition, did not show a significant impact on the results achieved in this competition (Table 2). However, more significant than the rest is the fact that the coaches who passed the group stage with their teams (on average  $\approx 38$  games) had already led the team in this competition, unlike those who failed to achieve that result (only  $\approx 9$ ). In addition, it is interesting to note that the coaches gained that experience mainly due to their appearances in the Champions League with previous clubs (29.22 vs 6.94).

**Table 2.** Coach's previous experience represented by age, tenure in the club and the number of Champions League appearances.

	Coaches		U test.
	TOP 16	Group Stage	
Age	52,06	50,75	0,468
Club member (years)	1,36	1,43	0,237
Career duration (years)	11,7	10,27	0,360
Total CL matches	37,89	8,81	0,066
CL current club	9	1,88	0,220
CL previous clubs	29,22	6,94	0,104

Playing experience in the Champions League for teams that reached the TOP16 was most valuable when the players gained that experience by performing in the starting lineup, more precisely when they spent more time on the pitch (Graph 1). Previous experience, observed through performances in the starting lineup, coming off the bench and sitting on the bench as substitutes, generally differs both within and between groups, with the biggest experience being gained by playing in the starting lineup.



**Graph 1.** Comparative analysis of playing experience in the Champions League in different roles (starter, substitute, bench) of the teams that reached the TOP 16 and those that finished the competition in the group stage.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to analyze the previously acquired experience in the Champions League in football, of all its immediate actors, players and coaches. Based on the analysis, as a secondary objective, it was necessary to determine possible differences in the experience of football players and coaches, the teams that made it to the knockout stage of the competition (TOP16) and those that ended their participation in the group stage (GROUP STAGE). Based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that experience in this competition is extremely important as the football players and coaches who continued the competition (TOP16) had significantly more appearances in previous seasons.



The average age of football players who played in the 2019/2020 Champions League season was between 26 and 27, expectedly with no difference between the teams that passed the group stage and those that did not. A similar result was obtained by Cullen et al. (2019), who stated that compared to the first season of the Champions League in 1992/1993, the average age of teams in the Champions League increased from 24.9 to 26.5. It would be interesting to see whether this trend will continue in the coming period, given that, according to some research, the age between 27 and 28 is the most productive for achieving the best results in football (Otterhals et al., 2021). However, taking into account the fact that football is increasingly moving towards high-intensity activities, and that for athletes where sprint dominates, peak performance is achieved at 25-26 years of age (Haugen et al., 2020) it can be expected that there will not be significant changes in terms of the average age of football players. This conclusion is also indicated by the data obtained analyzing the best leagues in Europe, the so-called Big five, where the average age of the players is 26 (Poli et al., 2021).

Continuity of the playing staff was achieved to a greater extent by the teams that passed the group stage of the competition, with players being in the club for almost three years before the start of the competition, which definitely indicates the importance of this factor in the process that precedes the achievement of top results. In addition to all of this, the result signals that the more successful teams had footballers with a significantly higher number of appearances in the competition until that moment, especially with the club they were playing for then. This in turn definitely indicates that the result in football is the product of a long-term strategy, planning and management of the football team. Therefore, apart from the players' ability, their teamwork and direct preparation, the result in the best club competition in football is determined by a number of psychological factors. Football players simply must be mentally strong, resistant to the variability of external stimuli that produce strong emotions and in turn together cause the distraction, and thus influence the result. Controlling all those disturbing factors is obviously easier and more effective when one has already been through similar situations, that is, previous experience helps. The confirmation of this point of view very often comes from practice, where unrealistic goals are usually set with large investments, in a short period of time, and such undertakings most often end in failure.

The analysis of the experience that the football players had in the competition showed that the most important form of experience was gained directly on the pitch. More precisely, it correlates with the time the player spent in the game. It is again interesting to see, based on the results (Graph 1), that the teams that continued the competition had significantly more footballers who gained their experience coming off the bench, and even by sitting on the bench. Such data indicate that direct playing is the dominant form of gaining competitive experience, but also that mere presence in the preparation for the competition, direct observation of the game, active participation in the analysis of the matches, contributes to facing and overcoming the competitive stress that matches with high stakes bring with them more easily.

The leading role in every sports team is certainly played by the team coach. The analysis of the experience of the coaches who led their teams in the 2019/2020 Champions League season indicates that previous experience is certainly important, but not to the extent that is the case with players. Still, the role of a coach means influencing many factors that create the environment in which a team function. The coach creates a strategy, within which he manages the organization of the professional services of the club, coordinates the work of the coaching staff, shapes the media image of the club, influences the preparation and opponent's experience of the match... Therefore, knowledge, experience, leadership

skills, communication skills and many other aspects of the coaching job affect, in an indirect or direct way, the quality of the team's game, players' self-confidence, and ultimately the result.

In practice, it has been confirmed that coaches with a certain rating in the last 10 years lead the teams with big budgets, with the best players (Maderer et al., 2014), so it can be said that this fact made their way to the end of the competition easier. Based on the results of this research, it is obvious that coaches gained most of their experience in previous clubs, unlike players. This could have been expected given that coaches stay in clubs for a shorter period of time. However, for complete understanding of this topic, it is important to point out that, as is the case with players, coaches can be distinguished based on their specialty. Namely, clubs hire football experts according to their strategic goals, so there are coaches who develop players (focus is not on the result), strong leaders who bring results in a short period of time (focus on the result), i.e., competitors who do not stay in clubs for a long time, and coaches and trainers who work in clubs for a long time and so yield results; coaches like Guardiola, Klopp, Simeone (James et al., 2007).

The importance of the influence of football actors' (football players, coaches, sports workers...) experience on the result is still an insufficiently researched topic. For a more comprehensive analysis, it is necessary to methodologically standardize data collection procedures. In this regard, the limiting factor of this research is certainly the fact that several teams which made their debut appearances in the 2019/2020 Champions League season, come from football-underdeveloped countries. Therefore, it is obvious that this sample influenced the research results. Also, the specialization of players to play in certain positions and their role in the team probably have different influences, thus the importance of experience when selecting players. In addition, given that the impact of players gaining experience in different roles in previous seasons (starter, substitute, bench) was examined, the question arises whether the experience of coaches in the roles of specialist coaches contributes to their work, evaluated on the basis of results, when they lead teams as head coaches.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the defined assumption that the acquired experience of players and coaches will have an impact on the team's results, it can be stated that, according to the results of this research, this is exactly what happened. It turns out that the players' experience, especially acquired in the role of a player who appears in the starting lineup in the current club, contributes to better results of the team. There is a similar finding when it comes to coaches, but their experience is based more on working in the same competition, but with previous clubs. The analysis has shown that clubs rely on players who are at their best age (26-27) to show their abilities, and that, compared to the period of 30 years ago, the average age of teams has increased. In the last few years, it has remained at an average of 26.5. This further suggests the need for player's experience on the one hand, but also for the selection of players who are able to follow the modern demands of the game, primarily in terms of physical abilities, on the other.

One of the conclusions of this research points to the great importance of long-term planning in terms of selecting players and structuring, when it comes to team composition. It is necessary to have both experience and the ability for the intensity of the game. However, an important factor is strategic introduction of, above all, young players into the team, their preparation through minor roles up to the status of standard players. Most importantly, what is needed is an individual approach and analysis of players' characteristics in every aspect, as some young players are capable of playing for a result and able



to bear the burden of great pressure, while others need time for such a thing. Still, it does not mean that the final outcome is different.

The coaching profession is one of the most important factors that determine the result. It is up to the clubs to define their strategic goals and to select the coaches who, according to their characteristics, fit into the values and ideas of the club, to have clear criteria and choose those who are needed by the club, and not those who need a club. In the end, the continuity of the playing and coaching staff will contribute to the achievement of good results only when the selection of all actors is conducted according to predefined rules.

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