Intellect

OLIVER ROEDER

And it's a goal! Again

My friend James Curley, a psychology professor who specialises in social behaviour, maintains what may be the world's most complete database of football results. The "England" portion alone contains more than 200,000 games, dating back to Derby County's 6-3 away win over Bolton Wanderers on September 8 1888.

When presented with a load of football data, one does the same thing as when watching a single football match: look for the goals. Within these spreadsheets there are millions of them. And while summary statistics don't tell especially colourful stories, they do suggest their outline. A simple average of goals casts a narrative shadow more than a century long – arcs in the story of football and its structure and the world in which it exists.
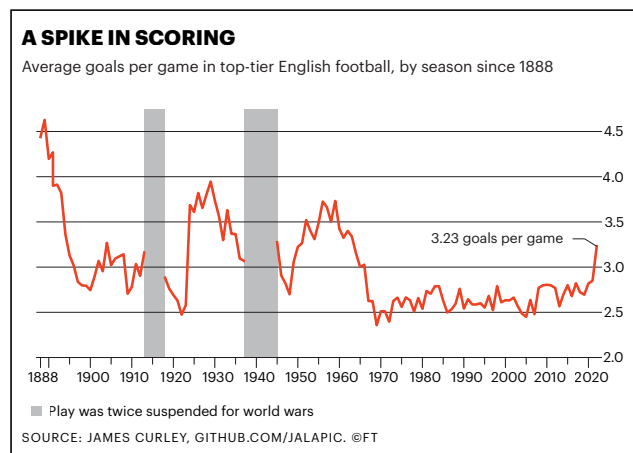
There was a dramatic goal spike in England in the 1920s, for example, that followed a loosening of the offside rule. In the 1950s, certain substitutions were allowed. The 1980s saw an increase in points awarded for a win. Offside was tweaked again in 1990. From 1992, goalkeepers couldn't handle back-passes. Referees now spray foam for free kicks and watch video monitors, and there are more substitutions. All along, tactical and technical innovations have come and some have gone, and money has been injected. To varying degrees, all of these stories are reflected in this heartbeat of goals.

ILLUSTRATION BY *GUILLEM CASASÚS*

For the past half century or so, though, goals in England's top tier had settled in a sort of God-given stasis, a cardiograph pulsing at about 2.6 per game. This season has disrupted that rhythm. As of writing, with six weeks left in a tight title race, there have been an average of over 3.2 goals per game in the Premier League – an increase of 20 per cent from just a few seasons ago and the most in 60 years. Which story is generating this data?

There are some attractive candidates. Perhaps the new goals are a reflection of increasing inequality in the Premier League. Sheffield United alone, for example, has conceded 2.7 goals per game, while Arsenal has scored 2.4. Put them in the same stadium and you'll get goals – 11, to be exact, all for Arsenal. Perhaps they are the result (desired or not) of some *à la mode* tactic, such as playing out from the back. Perhaps they are thanks to the now-ubiquitous video assistant referees awarding more dodgy penalties. Though surely it's got nothing to do with the foam.

But the marquee story this year is perhaps the simplest one: there's just been more football.

> At this rate, there will be the clock equivalent of a couple of dozen extra matches this season

A SPIKE IN SCORING
Average goals per game in top-tier English football, by season since 1888

3.23 goals per game

Play was twice suspended for world wars

SOURCE: JAMES CURLEY, GITHUB.COM/JALAPIC. ©FT

Throughout the 2010s, something like six and a half minutes of stoppage time were added to an average game. This season there have been nearly 12 minutes. A total of 125 goals (13 per cent) have already been scored in stoppage time as I write. For the whole of last season, that figure was 84 goals (8 per cent). In other words, many of these "new" goals always existed – in some alternate, unrealised multiverse – but were previously blinked out by a referee's whistle.

A handy précis of this column: on April 4, Cole Palmer and Chelsea dispatched Manchester United 4-3, with goals in the 100th (a penalty checked by VAR) and 101st minutes. The multiverse is here now.

Eye-watering amounts of overtime were first held up on digital boards at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. After the tournament, Fifa's rulemaking panel, the IFAB, agreed that "the stricter approach to calculating additional time should be adopted by competitions worldwide, as it will bring consistency to all competitions and ensure a fair amount of playing time". It even amended its Law 7, "The Duration of the Match". In essence, the moves are meant to disincentivise time-wasting. But the dramatic irony of the policy is its stretching of time. At this rate, there will be the clock equivalent of a couple of dozen extra matches this season, all made out of the durational remnants of Law 7.

A bit of napkin arithmetic suggests that more than half of this season's scoring increase is explained by this time. But that still leaves room for more romantic stories to emerge from the data. Perhaps some goals are simply a welcome byproduct of the new bravura of a favoured team. Curley mentioned his beloved Aston Villa. "Their clean sheets have gone into the toilet," he said. "But they've scored a lot of goals." **FT**

Oliver Roeder is the FT's US senior data journalist

DEPARTMENTS
Reports from lesser-known FT bureaux.
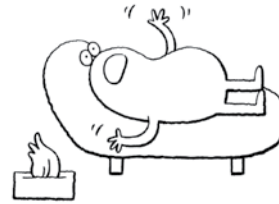
Drafts
Earliest-known version of 'Humpty Dumpty' (1797)
Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
Four-score Men and Four-score more,
Could not make Humpty Dumpty
where he was before.
Source: Iona and Peter Opie, "The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes" (1997)

Phraseology
Campaign slogans of failed US presidential candidates
1. "Who is James K Polk?" *Henry Clay, 1844*
2. "First in war, first in peace" *Winfield Scott, 1852*
3. "Turn the Rascals Out" *Horace Greeley, 1872*
4. "Ma, Ma, where's my Pa?" *James G Blaine, 1884*
5. "Peace. Progress. Prosperity"
James M Cox, 1920
6. "Dewey or don't we" *Thomas E Dewey, 1944*
7. "Dew it with Dewey" *Thomas E Dewey, 1948*
8. "Adlai and Estes, The Bestest" *Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver, 1956*
9. "Ross for Boss" *Ross Perot, 1992*
10. "Jobs not Mobs" *Donald Trump, 2020*
Source: Library of Congress

Husbandry
Once-essential dog breeds lost to time
Turnspit dog Tiny, stumpy-legged dogs bred to run in wheels that rotated spits of meat over a fire; disappeared with the advent of spit-turning machines.
Salish wool dog White-haired dogs raised on islands in packs by the Coast Salish people and sheared for their fleece; disappeared with the introduction of sheep to the Americas.
Source: "Turnspit Dogs: The Rise and Fall of the Vernepator Cur", NPR (2014); Virginia Morell, "The Dogs that Grew Wool and the People who Love Them", Hakai magazine (2021)

Last week's theme: abuse of language