

Winning Your Restarts

by Robert Parr

Many, many games are won or lost on restarts. The extent to which goals result directly from restarts remains an ongoing subject of debate, but research performed at the highest level of the game indicates that corner kicks, free kicks, and penalties produce nearly 30% of all goals. FIFA's official Technical Reports from eight recent championships provide the following data in support of this assertion:

Tournament	Goals from Corner Kicks	Goals from Free Kicks	Goals from Penalty Kicks	Goals from All Restart Kicks
Athens Olympics 2004 (Women)	5/55 (9.1%)	4/55 (7.3%)	2/55 (3.6%)	11/55 (20.0%)
Athens Olympics 2004 (Men)	10/101 (9.9%)	6/101 (5.9%)	7/101 (6.9%)	23/101 (22.8%)
WC 2003 USA (Women)	12/107 (11.2%)	19/107 (17.8%)	8/107 (7.5%)	39/107 (36.4%)
WC 2002 Korea/Japan (Men)	16/161 (9.9%)	16/161 (9.9%)	13/161 (8.1%)	45/161 (28.0%)
Sydney Olympics 2004 (Women)	3/42 (7.1%)	7/42 (16.7%)	4/42 (9.5%)	14/42 (33.3%)
Sydney Olympics 2004 (Men)	3/103 (2.9%)	10/103 (9.7%)	12/103 (11.7%)	25/103 (24.3%)
WC 1999 USA (Women)	12/123 (9.8%)	12/123 (9.8%)	7/123 (5.7%)	31/123 (25.2%)
WC 1998 France (Men)	21/171 (12.3%)	22/171 (12.9%)	17/171 (9.9%)	60/171 (35.1%)
TOTALS	82/863 (9.5%)	96/863 (11.1%)	70/863 (8.1%)	248/863 (28.7%)

Source: FIFA Technical Study Group
<http://www.fifa.com/en/development/technicalsection/>

What these statistics don't show is the impact all restarts (including throw-ins, goal kicks, and goalkeeper distributions) have on creating attacking chances and limiting defensive exposure. Even though your team may never score a goal directly from your own goal kick, failure to maintain possession following your goal kick could easily provide your opponent a chance to score against you in the run of play.

With that said, we need to have a more precise understanding of what it means to "win your restarts". Where does a restart end and the run of play begin? In general, if your team had both the **first and the second touches** on the ball after it was put back in play,

you can view that as a successful restart (the "first/second" rule). Any breakdown in possession or attacking execution beyond the second touch should be addressed as an error during the run of play. Of course, any restart that produces a goal for your team must be counted as a success as well!

The corollary to this idea is that your restarts should be simple by design, requiring no more than two or three touches to execute. Make your approach more complex than this, and you introduce all the challenges and risks associated with free-flowing play. In addition, each situation has its own unique requirements for success, including the following points:

- **Goal kicks and goalkeeper distribution.** The main priority with these types of restarts is to not turn over possession in your defensive half of the field. Whether played long or short, these services must go directly to your own players. Receiving players must have good, close, supporting options within their line of sight before the ball arrives, and the first/second rule has special importance here. An ideal scenario calls for the receiving player to deliver a one-touch pass (often with a header or volley) to a nearby teammate who then settles the ball. This tactic works well because many defenses tend to focus their pressure on the first player (and the ball) and lose track of close supporting players in these situations.
- **Throw-ins.** Generally, teams that turn the ball over on their own throw-ins suffer from a lack of mobility. The thrower needs to have multiple runners as options, with some players running into open spaces and others checking back to the thrower. Other considerations here include the quality of the throw itself (aim for the receiver's feet to maximize his options) and of the receiver's first touch (which must be technically clean). Again, the first/second rule applies, with the thrower often available to receive a one-touch return pass from the initial receiver. Of course, if you have the option to use a very long throw-in, you'll want to play throw-ins in the attacking third similar to an attacking corner kick.
- **Corner kicks.** Attacking corners must start with a quality service. No team can afford to squander such a valuable attacking opportunity by striking the ball far beyond the target players or (worse yet) out-of-play behind the goal! In addition, your team must "finish the play" with a shot that either scores or goes out of play. There are few momentum killers worse than allowing a counterattack goal from your own attacking corner kick, so make sure your opponent doesn't get that chance. Even if your team's shot is less than ideal (very high or wide of the goal), finishing the play ensures that you have time to get numbers back defensively before play resumes. Further, you can't score if you don't shoot; an emphasis on finishing the play will encourage your players to turn half-chances into legitimate scoring sequences (and not keep waiting for a "perfect" opportunity that never comes).
- **Free kicks.** The priorities for direct and indirect free kicks vary across the thirds of the field. In the attacking third, your set piece must conclude by finishing the play (see above). In the middle third, you must maintain possession of the ball. In the defensive third, you'll want to change the point of attack as quickly and safely as possible (often, but not always, with a long service). When the chance presents

itself, be sure to use a quick restart to catch the opposition when they are somewhat disorganized defensively. If you can't restart quickly, then take your time and ensure that you execute everything correctly. In this case, make sure you have the right people around the ball and the right players pushed into forward (target) positions, and do not put the ball back into play until you've allowed the referee to deal with any encroachment. As is the case for your attacking corner kicks, never allow your opponent to counter on your own free kick!

- **Penalty kicks.** Penalties should be "easy points" for your side, but experience proves they are far from automatic. To make the most of these opportunities, you must know who your best penalty-takers are before the match. Further, all of your players must distribute themselves across the top of the penalty area and rush into the area as soon as the shot is taken so they can put away any deflections. As the coach, you should think twice before allowing a player who has just been fouled to take the subsequent penalty. Even if that player is your best penalty-taker, the recent foul often will reduce his effectiveness from the spot. A minor injury can impede the shooter's normal mechanics, a hard fall can leave the player unfocused, and the emotional surge that accompanies a violent challenge could cause the player simply to overstrike the ball. Thus, your chances of converting may well be improved by giving the assignment to your next-best finisher in this circumstance.