

The lost opportunities of local football

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The from-the-couch conclusion of many South African football fans is that their top teams are not effective in converting opportunities into goals. And they are 100% correct, according to research by a masters student at Stellenbosch University.

A scientific performance analysis of a top premier division team's success in the penalty area has confirmed that the unnamed team - and indeed several others - generally do not produce the goals they should.

This emerged during one of dozens of presentations at the Second World Conference on Science and Soccer hosted by Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth on June 8 and 9.

The research by Stellenbosch University masters student Warren Engelbrecht showed that it took this team an average of 37.4 entries into the penalty area before it scored a goal.

Engelbrecht analysed 10 home games, focusing on the point of final action before the ball entered the penalty area, the part of the penalty area at which the entrance occurred, the method of entrance, the number of completed passes within the area, and the outcome of the entrance as well as the reason for the outcome.

During the games 19 goals were scored despite an average of 59.4 entrances into the critical penalty area during each game. The most frequent outcome was the ball being taken away by the opponents (42.1% of all entries). But the team also gave the ball away often (22.4% of all entries), largely as a result of poor passing.

He further found that the majority of goals came from the right-hand side of the goal, with most of the play leading to goals coming from open play (65%), and with 82% of goals coming from individual action or a direct strike.

"The over-riding picture however was that this team was not effective in converting opportunities," Engelbrecht told delegates from around the world, many of whom are staying on to watch the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

The burning issue for Engelbrecht, and for the rest of this soccer-mad nation, is why? Why do South African teams fail to deliver the goods?

Poor passing, predictability of attack, a lack of support play, high pressure from opponents as well as a lack of accuracy were found to be key determinants as to why the grand build-up with the ball so often fails to find the back of the net.

However, fear of failure and lack of responsibility by the strikers were also highlighted in the study as areas where coaches needed to pay greater attention.

Engelbrecht said there was an urgent need for further research, particularly around match analysis and performance analysis for professional teams to support coaching.