

Beyond the Pitch:

Balancing Data-Driven Success with
Performance and Data Privacy



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When Brentford Football Club got promoted to the top tier of English football in 2021¹ the club quickly realised that it would be difficult to compete with the division's more established clubs. The Championship triumph of the previous year would only matter on paper, and management would have to balance financial creativity, especially in the transfer market, with sporting sustainability to help the club stay up, compete, and perhaps eventually win something down the line.

The club's scouting network was handicapped, and since it could not just have several analysts across seven continents trying to unearth talent, it got creative. The club had to resort to data analytics, with strategic decision-making shifting fundamentally from relying solely on subjective eye tests to rigorously analysing hard data and statistical models. This method allowed the club to turn undervalued players into serial performers before they were moved on to the bigger clubs for serious profit.² As a result, what started as a financial necessity would, in retrospect, evolve to become a successful recruitment strategy.

Data analysis has been adopted by several sporting institutions, with the escalating demand for skilled analysts capable of translating raw numbers into actionable insights evident across global leagues. Its widespread adoption is reminiscent of the Moneyball approach popularised in baseball and has become a defining characteristic across professional sports, including football. A similar instance is the demonstrated success of the Oakland Athletics in using Sabermetrics, which illustrates how data has been used across professional sports and how a passing phenomenon is rapidly changing how professional sports teams, including those with stronger budgets, approach the business of their respective games.

This article will discuss sports data analysis in four key areas. The first aspect explores the use of personal data for players, especially its application by clubs, agents, and other stakeholders. The article will also analyse clubs' data usage in preparation for a new sporting season, encompassing pre-season, current-season, and post-season analysis of player and team performance. It is important to state here that while most of the examples and terminologies used throughout the article may be symptomatic of football (or soccer), the points made are generally applicable. The third section addresses how sporting and gaming platforms analyse player and club data for the new season, before the final section examines the data protection and privacy implications associated with all these data analysis practices within the sports industry.

THE ROLE OF QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS IN SPORTS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

Data analytics has fundamentally transformed how clubs, agents, and other stakeholders approach professional sports. It has moved beyond traditional scouting and instinct into a highly sophisticated, data-driven approach for talent identification and predictive analytics.

Data Analysis in Transfers and Player Performance

In this age, player transfers no longer rely solely on scouting and instinct. Clubs now extensively utilise big data to forecast, evaluate, and negotiate for new signings. This revolution is not confined to elite clubs but is also being adopted by lower-tier teams, helping them gain a competitive edge. Algorithms collect vast amounts of data from thousands of domestic league matches, international competitions,

¹ English Premier League: <https://www.premierleague.com/en/news/2162143>

² New York Times: Access All Areas: Brentford – inside the club's envied recruitment set-up: <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/4709058/2023/07/26/access-all-areas-brentford-recruitment/>

and even youth academy bouts to predict player performances, encompassing metrics like expected goals (“xG”), distance covered, pressing frequency, and even psychological toughness. A typical example is in relation to Brentford’s signing of Celtic’s star defender Kristoffer Ajer in 2021. The club had analysed over 100 games where the defender played, highlighting key metrics related to what the player was and what the club wanted, before categorising his performances in those games into green, for when he had a good game, and red for a bad performance³.

Top clubs have also adopted Predictive analysis, a data-driven approach which helps to identify future talent by relying on key performance indicators (“KPIs”) and historical data to forecast a player’s potential trajectory. This proactive approach enables clubs to gain a significant head start in signing promising young players. In similar instances, Advanced Artificial Intelligence (“AAI”) can even simulate entire player careers to predict the probability of a young player becoming a national team starter. A notable example is Liverpool FC’s data-driven identification of Mohamed Salah as a key transfer target in 2017, based on evaluations of his speed, technical skills, and goal-creating ability.

Data Analysis in Transfer Negotiations

In 2021, Manchester City legend Kevin De Bruyne (“KDB”) leveraged his data to negotiate a contract renewal with the club.⁴ Curiously, KDB’s adoption of this data-driven approach also helped him negotiate his deal without a recognised football agent, as he only needed to use two respected lawyers and leading football analytics services, Analytics FC, to meticulously analyse his on-field performance metrics, his contributions to the team’s success, and even the team’s financial growth directly tied to his presence.

A similar instance can be observed with Manchester City midfielder Kevin De Bruyne, who famously negotiated one of football’s most lucrative contracts by letting data argue his worth.⁵ This data-backed strategy allowed him to bypass a traditional agent completely, instead commissioning an analytics firm to highlight his expected goals, expected assists, and overall performance-related metrics relative to other elite midfielders. By leveraging this objective data, he set a new benchmark for how athletes can advocate for themselves, giving professional sports figures the power to exert greater control over their careers by directly articulating their true market value.

The data here is about storytelling. Data transforms raw potential into measurable value, making it easier to argue for higher salaries, longer contracts, or more favourable sponsorship terms. This extends beyond pure on-field performance metrics to encompass social media engagement rates, audience demographics, and growth trends. This holistic view highlights the increasing commercialisation of player data, where a player’s value extends beyond their athletic performance to include their brand and fan engagement. It implies that a player’s digital footprint and social influence are becoming quantifiable assets in contract negotiations, blurring the lines between athletic performance and personal brand management.

³ New York Times: Access All Areas: Brentford – inside the club’s envied recruitment set-up: <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/4709058/2023/07/26/access-all-areas-brentford-recruitment/>

⁴ New York Times: Kevin De Bruyne and the rise of data and analytics in contract negotiations: <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5166636/2024/01/03/football-contract-negotiation-data-analytics-transfers/>

⁵ Kevin De Bruyne and the rise of data and analytics in contract negotiations: <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5166636/2024/01/03/football-contract-negotiation-data-analytics-transfers/>

RELEVANCE OF DATA ANALYSIS TO GAMING PLATFORMS

Gaming platforms analyse player performance through several analytical lenses. Player behaviour analytics track player actions, decisions, and outcomes to understand user interaction patterns and trends. Gameplay analytics focuses on metrics like speed, accuracy, and completion rates to provide a detailed understanding of a player's mechanics, highlighting strengths and weaknesses. Performance Analytics measures overall player performance via scores, rankings, and progress over time. Key metrics tracked include time spent playing, frequency of play, progression through levels or stages, and in-game purchases.

The types of data collected⁶ exhibit striking parallels with the metrics utilised in real-world football performance analysis. The gaming industry's focus on optimising strategies and techniques and identifying areas for improvement directly mirrors player development objectives in football. This strong alignment suggests that the sophisticated methodologies and analytical tools developed within the gaming sector could have direct applicability or inspire significant innovation in traditional sports analytics.

Furthermore, gaming platforms track not only performance but also nuanced player behaviour, player feedback, and social metrics. This aligns perfectly with the emerging trend in football analytics to quantify psychological traits and off-field behaviour. The concepts of "player progression through levels or stages" and "retention rate" in games can be analogised to player development pathways and career longevity in football, suggesting that engagement, motivation, and psychological factors are critical to sustained performance in both digital and physical sporting domains. This points to a future where player analysis in football may increasingly incorporate engagement metrics and psychological profiling techniques refined in gaming, leading to more holistic player management strategies that consider mental well-being, long-term motivation, and overall engagement.

Leveraging Data for Sports Betting Odds & Insights

Modern sports betting is an incredibly data-intensive field. To set accurate odds, oddsmakers use sophisticated models that combine a wide range of data, including historical player performance, matchup trends, injury reports, and real-time betting market behaviour. For specific player bets, such as a star footballer scoring a goal, algorithms leverage even more granular data, like attacking versus defensive matchups and home-ground advantage. The ability to process real-time data is critical for offering live odds and keeping dynamic markets updated with unfolding events.

A tremendous amount of money is invested in acquiring this real-time data. This allows betting companies to make rapid odds adjustments, which is key to ensuring profitability and maintaining a competitive edge. This drive to stay ahead means that top-tier teams of data scientists are constantly reprogramming algorithms and integrating machine learning. This intense focus on gaining an informational advantage creates a fundamental tension with player data privacy, as betting companies are incentivised to seek access to even more sensitive athlete information.

There is a symbiotic relationship between sports, gaming, and betting platforms that is driving significant innovation and commercialisation. Sports organisations generate the raw performance data, gaming platforms refine the methodologies for analysing player behaviour, and betting

⁶ This includes key data points such as (player behaviour, gameplay mechanics, performance metrics like speed, accuracy, progression, win-loss ratios)

companies leverage this aggregated data for commercial purposes like setting odds. This creates a powerful feedback loop: betting interest fuels the demand for more granular sports data, which, in turn, drives further innovation in data collection and analysis. While this convergence creates new revenue streams for sports organisations, it also raises complex issues regarding data ownership and the potential for conflicts of interest, ultimately blurring the lines between sports as pure competition and a data-driven entertainment product.

This convergence is also revolutionising fan engagement through data personalisation. AI can now personalise experiences by tracking your favourite players, teams, and betting interests, delivering updates and content tailored specifically to you. While this highly individualised content delivery model enhances the fan experience, it relies on extensive data profiling. This raises significant privacy concerns, as a user's betting habits and preferences become part of their digital footprint. This data can be used for targeted marketing or even behavioural manipulation, suggesting that the quality and personalisation of data-driven content increasingly influence fan loyalty.

DATA PRIVACY AND PROTECTION CONSIDERATIONS

Understanding Data Type and Sensitivity

The personal data collected on athletes is both comprehensive and highly sensitive. It can be categorised to include Personally Identifiable Information (PII)⁷, Medical Information⁸, Performance Data⁹, Financial Information, and Biometric Data like fingerprints and heart rate are often collected by wearable devices.

The classification of these data, especially health and biometric information, can significantly elevate the privacy risks. A data breach could lead to the public disclosure of an athlete's private health information, which could place them at a competitive disadvantage and negatively impact their market value. This necessitates the implementation of more robust legal and security frameworks than those for general consumer data. It also highlights the potential for this data to be weaponised or misused in contract negotiations, affecting an athlete's career and public perception.

A critical and often controversial legal issue is who owns the data collected from athletes. While some agreements, such as the one between the NFLPA and WHOOP¹⁰, grant players ownership and control over their data, this is not a universal standard. The current legal ambiguity raises serious concerns about privacy rights, bodily autonomy, and labour rights. Experts argue that athletes should have unfettered access to and undeniable ownership of all their performance data. This lack of clarity creates a significant risk for litigation and raises the possibility of unfair exploitation by teams or third parties, especially given the immense commercial value of this data.

Key Data Protection Regulations and Compliance

The regulatory landscape governing athlete data is a complex and fragmented patchwork of laws. This includes major international frameworks like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the

⁷ Core personal details such as name, date of birth, and contact information.

⁸ Highly sensitive data, including injury history, medical conditions, and treatment plans.

⁹ A broad category that includes training metrics, competition results, and various forms of biometric data. This can range from heart rate and GPS tracking (detailing speed and acceleration) to other physiological indicators of physical exertion.

¹⁰ NFL Players Association: <https://nflpa.com/partners/posts/nflpa-takes-ownership-stake-in-sports-data-labs-signs-groundbreaking-partnership-to-transform-monetization-opportunities-for-nfl-player-performance-data>

European Union, which sets a high standard for data privacy, mandating that data be processed lawfully and with explicit consent, especially for sensitive information. In the United States, a variety of laws apply, such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). However, the lack of a single federal standard means that U.S. states have created their own rules, such as Illinois's Biometric Information Privacy Act (BIPA), which has led to significant legal challenges and a state of legal uncertainty. This complex legal environment, with its varying jurisdictional laws and international reach, creates a significant compliance burden for global sports organisations, making a "one-size-fits-all" approach impossible.

In Nigeria, the Nigeria Data Protection Act (NDPA) 2023 provides another crucial legal framework, particularly for organisations operating in or with ties to Nigeria. The NDPA applies to both automated and manual data processing and covers Nigerian residents and citizens abroad. Like the GDPR, the NDPA is built on core principles of lawfulness, fairness, and transparency, as well as purpose limitation and data minimisation. It places a strong emphasis on sensitive personal data, including health status and biometric data. It mandates that consent be freely given, specific, and informed, requiring a clear, affirmative action from the data subject.

Informed consent is a critical feature in this regulatory environment. It is more than a simple formality; it is a legal requirement that demands clear communication to athletes about how and why their data is being collected. Failure to secure proper, explicit consent can expose clubs and leagues to significant legal risks and future lawsuits. This shifts the onus onto organisations to not only educate athletes about data usage but also to implement robust consent management systems.

The consequences of non-compliance and data breaches can be severe and far-reaching. Beyond substantial financial penalties, which can be as high as €20 million or 4% of annual global turnover under GDPR, there is also the risk of severe reputational damage to athletes, teams, and organisations. The public disclosure of confidential information can directly lead to a competitive disadvantage for an athlete and even diminish their market value. This highlights that data protection is not just a legal or financial issue but a matter of sporting integrity and player well-being. Ethical considerations are deeply intertwined with these practices, as data should never be used in ways that perpetuate biases or unfairly discriminate against individuals, emphasising the need for a human-centric approach to data governance in sports.

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

Data has fundamentally reshaped modern sports, transforming them from a realm of subjective assessment to one of objective, evidence-based decision-making. This data-driven revolution provides immense opportunities for clubs and athletes to gain a competitive advantage, from optimising on-pitch performance and revolutionising player transfers to enhancing fan engagement through personalised digital experiences. However, this extensive data collection also introduces significant challenges, particularly regarding the complex legal and ethical landscape of data privacy. The core tension lies in maximising data utility for commercial and sporting success while simultaneously protecting the rights and well-being of athletes and fans. The sensitive nature of athlete data demands rigorous protection, while the fragmented regulatory environment creates a constant risk of non-

compliance and litigation. To navigate this landscape, all stakeholders must adopt a strategic and responsible approach that integrates human intuition with data-driven insights.

Sporting organisations must invest in an integrated data infrastructure to ensure data quality and integrity, standardisation, and accessibility across all departments, from scouting to medical. It's crucial to adopt a "privacy by design" approach, embedding data protection measures from the start of any new project and conducting regular privacy audits. Clubs and sporting organisations must also prioritise athlete data ownership and transparency by establishing clear policies that grant athletes control over their personal and performance data. This includes obtaining informed and explicit consent and providing athletes with direct access to their raw data. Lastly, clubs should foster a hybrid decision-making culture where data insights augment, rather than replace, the intuition and expertise of coaches and analysts.

Leagues and governing bodies should take the lead in standardising data collection and sharing protocols across the industry. This will improve data quality and comparability across clubs and competitions. A critical step is to strengthen regulatory frameworks by harmonising data protection regulations, especially for cross-border transfers and the use of biometric data. These bodies should also establish clear guidelines on data ownership and commercialisation rights for athletes. Ethical oversight should be enhanced with robust guidelines and enforcement mechanisms to address issues like misinformation and potential exploitation in transfers. Promoting data literacy and education for players, clubs, and agents is also key to ensuring responsible data practices across the board.

Gaming Platforms must ensure robust data security and compliance by implementing state-of-the-art encryption and strictly adhering to all relevant data protection regulations. Transparency with users is paramount; platforms should be clear about how user data is collected, used, and shared, and provide easy-to-use privacy management tools. Furthermore, it is ethically imperative to ensure that AI and machine learning algorithms used for personalisation, odds setting, and behavioural analysis are fair and unbiased. These models should not encourage or exacerbate problematic gambling behaviour. Finally, these platforms should collaborate with sports organisations to ensure the accuracy and reliability of real-time data feeds, which is essential for maintaining integrity in both sports and betting.

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