

## The Effect of Coach Stability on the Performance of Football Teams in Iran Pro League

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the present research was to examine the effect of coach stability on the performance of the football teams in Iran Pro League (IPL). The population of the research consisted of 18 football teams in the 2009-2010 season of IPL and the required data was collected from archival documents of the league department of Iran's Football Federation. The difference in the performance of teams with and without coach stability was analyzed using Mann-Whitney U test. Performance was examined with respect to eight measures: points, rank, wins, draws, losses, goals for, goals against, goal difference, and coach stability (i.e. whether or not the coach has been fired during the studied season). From the 18 studied teams, 33.33% had coach stability, while 66.67% of the teams had changed their coaches at least once during the season. The mean coaching life in the studied season is 16.1 weeks. Coach stability has been effective for the performance of teams in terms of points ( $z=-2.29$ ,  $p=0.022$ ), rank ( $z=-2.34$ ,  $p=0.019$ ), wins ( $z=-2.13$ ,  $p=0.033$ ), draws ( $z=-54.2$ ,  $p=0.011$ ), and goal difference ( $z=-1.96$ ,  $p=0.049$ ). The findings of the research show that instability and coach turnover is a common issue in IPL. Although managers change the coach in order to get better results, the results of the research suggest the ineffectiveness of this strategy.

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### 1. Introduction

Organizations change their management in order to improve performance. The effect of these changes on performance is an important issue in the area of sports and has remained a question in organizational sociology and sport management after three decades of experimental research (1, 2, & 3). The coach is an essential element in the management of football teams, for they make certain administrative and strategic decisions that affect team performance (4, 5, 6, 7, 8). Coaches train players, motivate them, select them for different matches, and make decisions regarding tactics and strategies (9 & 10). If the coach fails to meet the expectations, they may be fired or transferred. Nonetheless, firing or transferring coaches is a common phenomenon in professional football that occurs due to various reasons. Sometimes coaches themselves are willing to leave the team and sometimes managers consider firing coaches based on discretion or following poor results so as to prevent undesirable results and achieve success. In some cases, team managers change the coach as a response to the harsh criticism of fans and the media. Most researchers believe that poor performance of teams is the main reason for firing the coach and managers hope to improve team performance through this strategy. However, the effect of coach turnover on the future

performance of teams is not clear (1, 2, 11, 12, 13, 14, & 15).

Some studies have shown that changing the coach improves team performance. Fabianic (1994) and McTeer et al. (1995) found improvement in the performance of teams as a result of coach turnover. Using the data from 5 seasons of Italian "Serie A" (2003-2008), De Paola et al. (2008) examined coach turnover during these seasons and reported that, on average, 41% of the teams changed their coach at least once during a given season. 23% of matches were played under the management of a new coach, and coach changes were more frequent among low-performing teams (65% of the 10 lowest ranking teams) and rare among high-performing teams (16% of the highest ranking teams). On average, the teams managed by new coaches earned more points. Furthermore, on average, the number of goals scored per game increased and the number of goals conceded decreased, suggesting improved goal difference. This shows that new coaches were able to improve both offensive and defensive skills. In sum, this study showed that the effect of coach change on team performance is positive and statistically significant. However, the magnitude of the effect was small, where playing with a new coach yielded a team 2-3 points more every 10 matches (5). Van Vugt et al. (2008)

studied the effect of stability on the performance of professional football teams in the English Premier League (1998-2007) and in the Italian Serie A (2001-2002). They reported that of the 18 teams featured across 9 seasons of Premier League, there were 131 instances of manager stability (73%) and 49 instances of change (27%). Compared with those teams that experienced managerial stability, teams that experienced change were ranked lower at the end of the season (17). The results of Baldock et al. (2008) suggested the effect of new coaches on team quality in Belgian male soccer teams during a period of 7 seasons (1998-2005). They showed that a new coach will be able to improve the ranking of the team if the improved team quality under the new coach renders a positive team quality (18).

In contrast, some researchers have reported decline in the performance of teams as a result of coach turnover. Using the data from 26 teams in the National Football League (NFL), Brown (2006) concluded that coach changes leads to slightly more than one loss in that season. Thus, this strategy is somehow a scapegoating process by the management to placate fans and the media. Salomo and Teichmann (2000), Audas et al. (2002), and Audas et al. (2006) have also reported the negative effect of coach changes on performance (5). Ghahfarokhi and Farahani (2010) studied coach turnover in seven seasons of IPL (2001-2008) and reported that the mean coaching life is about 22 weeks. 73% of teams with coach turnover fired the new coach at the end of the same season. It was thus shown that choice, transfer, or dismissal of coaches has no scientific basis and is mostly a short-term response to the critical conditions of the team. The teams with coach changes had no improvement in performance (19). It must be noted that researchers such as Koning (2000&2002), Bruinshoofd and Ter Weel (2003), and Maximiano (2006) studied the effect of coach turnover on the performance of German, Belgian, and Italian football teams and reported no significant improvement in performance following coach turnover (16). There are many instances of coach turnover in Iran Pro League (IPL) that are mostly based on hasty, unscientific decisions, and there are different views regarding the effect of these actions on the future of teams (20). The financial structure of most teams in IPL is public and the managers make excessive use of public funds and budgets in employing or transferring players and coaches. Many scholars believe that coach turnover wastes financial resources, deteriorates performance, and reduces the quality of games (21& 22). The fired coaches are, by contract, entitled to their wage for the remainder of the contract, while the team has to pay an extortionate cost for the new coach (19& 24). These actions not only impose heavy costs on teams, but also mar the prestige of Iran's sport.

Therefore, the present research tries to examine the effect of coach stability (as opposed to coach turnover) on the performance of the teams in Iran Pro League

## 2. Material and Methods

The present research is descriptive-comparative and the required data is collected from the valid archival documents of the league committee of Iran's Football Federation (26). The research period is the 2009-2010 season of IPL and the population consists of 18 football teams that participated in that season. Descriptive statistics (mean, minimum, maximum, standard deviation, percentage, tables, and graphs) were used to organize the raw data and describe the obtained values. Moreover, Mann-Whitney U test was applied to examine the difference between the performances of teams with and without coach stability. The main variables of the research are coach stability and performance. According to some researchers, sudden coach dismissal within a season leads to the highest variance of performance during the process of replacement. The present research also examines coach stability within a season. Thus, the performance of stable teams (with no coach turnover in a season) is compared to that of unstable teams (with coach turnover in a season). Team performance is examined with respect to eight measures: points, rank, wins, draws, losses, goals for, goals against, and goal difference (goals scored minus goals conceded). In IPL, each win, draw, and loss has 3, 1, and 0 points respectively and the ranking of a team is determined by the sum of the earned points.

## 3. Results

In Table 1, coach stability in IPL during the season 2009-2010 is presented and Figure 1 is a pie chart representation of the table. 33.33 percent of the 18 teams have coach stability and 66.67 percent of teams have changed their coach at least once during the season. It must be noted that the earliest instance of coach turnover happened in the fifth week of the season and the latest instance occurred in the 32<sup>nd</sup> season (two weeks before the end of the season). 71% of all the games in the season were played under the management of new (replaced) coaches. Among the 12 teams that changed their coach during the season, about 33 percent of the teams are in the upper half and about 67 percent of the teams are in the lower half of the table. The mean coaching life in the studied season is 16.1 weeks.

In Table 2, the performance of the teams in the studied season is presented in terms of eight indices. Considering the classification of normal frequency

distribution<sup>1</sup> and based on the earned points, it can be concluded that one team has great performance (Sepahan Isfahan), one team has good performance (Zob Ahan Isfahan), fourteen teams have average performance (ranks 3 to 16), and two teams have poor performance (ranks 17 and 18). The maximum, minimum, and mean points earned in the league are 67, 30, and 45.16 respectively with a standard deviation of 10.01. In other words, the league champion earned 65.68 percent of maximum points and the lowest ranking team earned 29.41 percent of maximum points. A comparison of the percentage of points earned by teams with and without coach stability showed that those teams with coach stability earned 65.82 percent of the maximum points for home matches and 39.5 percent of the maximum points for away matches. However, those teams without coach stability earned 43.35 percent of the maximum points for home matches and 22.35 percent of the maximum points for away matches.

Table 4 shows the results of Mann-Whitney U test that compares the performance of teams with and without coach stability with based on the measures of performance. It is revealed that there is a significant difference in the performance of teams with and without coach stability in terms of earned points ( $z = -2.29$ ,  $p = 0.022$ ), rank ( $z = -2.34$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ), wins ( $z = -2.13$ ,  $p = 0.033$ ), draws ( $z = -54.2$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ). This shows that the wins, goal difference, and points of teams with coach stability are higher, while the draws and rank of teams without coach stability are higher. It can be concluded that coach stability leads to better performance of the teams in IPL.

#### 4. Discussions

The results suggest the long time span of coach instability during a season, starting from the beginning weeks of the league and continuing until the last weeks. The instability in IPL is considerably higher as compared to studies carried out in other countries. In the research of Van Vugt et al. (2008), from 180 teams in 9 seasons of Premier League, 73 percent of the teams had coach stability and 27 percent had coach turnover. In De Paola et al. (2008), 41 percent of the teams had changed their coach in one season. However, in the present research 33.33 percent of the teams have coach stability and 66.67 percent of teams have changed their coach at least once within the season. On the other hand, in De Paola et al. (2008) 23 percent of games are played under the management of new coaches, while in the present research 71 percent

of the league games are played under the management of new coaches. Comparing the results with the means of previous seasons suggest the growing instability (coach turnover) of the teams in IPL, where the mean coaching life is 22 weeks in seven seasons and 16.1 weeks during the season studied in this research. This shows the increasing trend of coach turnover in Iranian football teams and it is imperative to take measures in preventing this negative approach.

The results of the present research showed that teams with coach stability had great or good performance during the season, while instability and coach turnover has been followed by average or poor performance. This finding is consistent with the results of De Paola et al. (2008) and Salomo and Teichmann (2000).

Teams with coach instability significantly outperformed teams without coach stability. This is consistent with the results of Brown (2006), Salomo and Teichmann (2000), and Van Vugt et al. (2008). However, this finding is not consistent with the results of Van Dalen (1994), Balduck et al. (2008), Fabianic (1994), McTeer et al. (1995), and De Paola et al. (2008). The consistency or inconsistency of the results of these studies and the present research may signify the different effects of coach turnover on the performance of football teams. In other words, the effect of coach turnover on performance is moderated by such variables as time of transfer, quality of the teams in the remainder of the season, and the number of home/away games played under the management of the new coach. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies take these moderators into account.

In sum, change and instability are common elements of IPL teams. Considering the positive effect of coach stability on certain measures of team performance, it can be argued that coaches are mostly fired for purposes other than getting better results, such as responding the criticism of fans and media or scapegoating in order to secure the position of the management. Moreover, instances where coaches are changed to prevent poor results have not been successful. In other words, choice, transfer, or turnover of coaches has no scientific basis and serves as a short-term response to the critical conditions of a team. Ghahfarokhi and Farahani (2010) also came to a similar conclusion regarding coach turnover in IPL. Therefore, it would be better if managers and administrators created a stable environment for coaches and made proper planning for employment or transfer of coaches. This strategy not only improves the performance of teams, but is also effective in preventing additional costs and thus enhances the economic performance and efficiency of the teams. On the other hand, due to the similarity between behaviors in athletic environments and those in the organizations

<sup>1</sup> ( $M \pm 1.8$  SD and higher = Great); ( $M \pm 1.2$  SD to  $M - 1.8$  SD = Good); ( $M \pm 1.2$  SD = Average); ( $M + 1.8$  SD to  $M - 1.8$  SD = Poor); ( $M - 1.8$  SD and lower = Very poor)

of a society of which football is a part (according to Wolfe et al., 2005), it appears that the instability in Iran Pro League can be generalized to other organizations and necessary measures must be taken to prevent such a spreading feature.

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