1. Pre-match

1.1 Content selection and scheduling

It is known that the pre-match, the immediate hours before a match, is not exactly included under the heading of the match analysis, as this course is called, but we consider it essential to include it in this section due to three main reasons:

- Proximity in time. We consider the pre-match as the time period of a couple of hours or minutes before the match itself.
- Emotional management of the group/player. The following emotional management of the match depends a lot on the information that we transmit during those previous moments. In this sense, the pre-match can be used to arouse the emotions that we want to come up during the match and avoid those which are not going to be helpful. For example, if I ask my fullback to be brave and bold when facing an opponent in appropriate one-to-one situations, I should not reproach him for failing on his first try. Cheering him up so he keeps trying will encourage his boldness and courage.
- Coherence in the whole message. The information provided during the pre-match cannot contradict the one provided during the development of the match itself. For example, if in my match plan, reminded to players during the pre-match, I state that once we are leading the game we will continue with the tactical disposition as in the beginning, I should not send a contradictory message by performing a tactical line-up shift or a substitution that may suggest a grand tactical change.

In the following section we will deal with the questions about the process of content selection and distribution related to the analysis during the pre-match.
This process is determined or conditioned to a great extent by:

- The closeness of the match
- The need to make the message concrete and simple
- Time restrictions
- The psycho-social aspects that the encounter awakes on the players
- etc.

In this unit our aim is to organize the information that we are going to transmit to our players in these moments.

A. What will that information be about?

- About our team - match plan:

    - Individual - self.
    - Collective - group/team.
- About the opponent - operative strategy:
    - Individual
    - Collective - group/team.
    - Usual behaviours in concrete circumstances - player, team, coach.
- About set pieces (SP).
- About the referee team.
- Context of the match - fans, venue, etc.
- Reaffirmation of values.
- Emotional factors.
- Statements made by the opponent.
- Other circumstances.

This general script can be useful to gather all the information that should be present in these moments.
Also, as has been said before, we need to make information concrete and simple in the forestate of the game. This means that we need to filter everything we have been working on during the week as well as some aspects that we probably did not work on due to lack of time, among other factors.
To do this filtering entails assessing what I should transmit and what I should not.
We need to review all that information, first.

In the following passage there is an example of a series of items to review at a global and individual level.

<u>At a GLOBAL level</u>
The main objective is to highlight the most important general aspects to consider, both in relation to our play and our opponent's play. We will decide on the definitive line-up.

Our own defensive aspects, highlighting and reinforcing:

- Type of defense.
- Alignment.
- Prevailing defensive line-up.
- First-order tactical principles. Active play area.
- Second-order tactical principles. Area far from play.
- Specific considerations in relation to the match plan.

- Main set pieces.

Our own build-up aspects, reinforcing and reminding:

- Spatial distribution.
- Prevailing attack.
- First-order tactical principles in relation to the active play area.
- Tactical principles of players located in front of or behind the player in possession of the ball.
- Tactical principles of those who may be circumstantially far from the ball.
- Technical actions related to the dynamics of play. Most relevant chains in relation to the corresponding stage of attack.
- End of the match and finishing. Which players score, which ones clearance and which ones vigilance.
- Counter kick based on ball recovery, starting position and definition of arrivals.
- Build-up set pieces - during attack.

From the perspective of the **opponent's** play, certain fundamental aspects that we consider worthy of reviewing will be highlighted.

- Basic defense that allow the group to remember the main strategic sources on which our opponents base their play.
- Most relevant build-up actions that we consider essential in relation to the upcoming match.

<u>At an INDIVIDUAL level</u>

The amount of information that we will offer will depend on the needs of each player, which is why this entails a real individualization process.

This information corresponds with the perspective of the **opponent**'s analysis as regards:

- Habitual and recurrent mistakes that the opponent usually makes during matches, from which some advantage may be taken.
- Concrete weaknesses from which we can take advantage.
- Attitudes towards specific aspects of the competition that our player needs to know.
- Sensitive issues in relation to concrete aspects of the game that may become an advantage for our player, such as late entries, nervousness at one-to-one, shyness towards headers, etc.
- Relevant spaces in the opponent's play and weak spaces that can be exploited from the position held by the player who receives the report.
- Individual strengths of the pair that will hold similar positions, which have to be seriously taken into account.

- Individual weaknesses of the pair that will hold similar positions, which have to be exploited in order to get some advantage.
- If the game requires so, specific information about the basic physical attributes available, which will allow our player to come up with concrete responses to them.
- All the information that the player considers important to enhance his competitive possibilities when facing the imminent match.
- We should have this information about all the opposing players ready so as to avoid lack of knowledge or surprises regarding the line-up.

From the perspective of our **own** play:

- Specific technical aspects used to exploit concrete characteristics of our opponent.
- Tactical particularities when competing in a direct way with the opponent.
- Relevant areas to occupy during defensive/build-up situations, accordingly.
- Mistakes and recurrences that we consider essential for our team to avoid so as not to become exposed during the match.

As we said before, what we have offered here is an example of a series of items to review in relation to the criteria previously mentioned - global or individual information. Let us not forget that this is the moment of the pre-match, therefore, all these questions should derive from a previous filtering process which in turn results in very concrete and summarized information.

Here we present a couple of examples of opponent's reports that, as may be proved, are designed for this moment of high level of summary and concreteness.

Figure 1: Operative strategy - as regards the opponent - in the match plan of the Analyst of the Arsenal FC 2019

universidad de león

FCAFD

U.D. SUR

PRE-MATC REPORT

GROUP V. HONOR DIVISION. 2014/2015 SEASON

Sunday 19th, March, 12:00hs

DEFENSIVE ORGANIZATION

The two forwards (Jordán and Álvaro) put pressure on the center backs so they cannot play the ball.

Defensive phase starts in the opponent's pitch, with a player that goes fast towards the ball to avoid the opponent's organized progression, and as from own pitch, they play more intensely, with help from the player near the ball.

They play with a 4-4 defence in the center of the pitch where Abril.

DEFENCE-ATTACK TRANSITION

They try to get the ball quickly into the danger zone, where Jordán is usually the smartest one (he plays between opponent's lines) who also quickly finds the easy way into the defence, which is what they look for to finish the action. More direct play over Alvaro.

BUILD-UP ORGANIZATION

They play with two quality center mid-fielders, organized and with good ball touch, and as from there, they play from within with Jordán, who always tries to get behind our lines of center mid-fielders, and with space before the defense line or through the wing, generally Diego's (right wing, although he alternates between both).

ATTACK-DEFENCE TRANSITION

High pressure on the ball, mainly in losses on their pitch, where they play to the limit.

Source: Panedas Casado, 2014, p19.

Figure 2: Operative strategy during a match.

ATTACK

* How to attack their positional 1442 defense?
  - Attract MFs to attack their backs.
  - Play at width, fullbacks receive between the 2nd and 3rd line.
  - Engagement before pass. Avoid defense of pass line.

* How to attack the box?: Defending the zone 4-2 and protecting the central corridor 2-2, fullbacks do not defend the opposing deep fullback.
  - Attack the gaps.
  - Good CZO (Clearance zone occupation).

DEFENSE

* Attack C-C interval and behinds after recovery or win fall on DP (direct play), especially after their DP.

* Defend counter-attack:
  - Vigilance's structure.
  - Control caught players out of possession ahead of the ball (avoid Hatem Ben Arfa's 1st superiority).
  - Defend players far from the finishing zone.
* Positional attack:
  - Defend fullbacks' give and go.
  - Crosses + Controlling the main attack from the player far from our position.
- **Avoid shots off target.**
* How to defend their set pieces? Protect near post (corner).
  - Avoid fouls.

Source: produced on the basis of Mañas, 2019, http://bit.ly/38O7WNt

B. How will that information be?

- Truthful and meaningful, that is, trustworthy and useful to get to know some aspect qualitatively and quantitatively.
  - Operative.
    - Be it in a direct way, given as such to players.
    - Or in an indirect way, influencing on the match plan.

- Powerful, that is, useful to empower the coach and/ or player in fulfilling the objectives. It has to lead us to phrases that transmit messages of the sort: How are we going to win the match?
- Exciting. This information, conveyed in a positive and optimistic way, will have a greater impact than that influenced by fear or apprehension to lose.
- Predictive. Every time we are asked, we need to anticipate the opposing team's possible behaviours. This implies certain risks, which we need to assume as they are part of our job. We should have this clear in our minds. In this predictive section we need to avoid the use of words such as 'never' or 'always', since they describe reality in a biased way.
- Brief, clear and concise, so it can be easily assimilated.
- Flexible, that is, it should not be a weight for the player who needs to know this information.
- Individualized, when possible, according to the context of each team. Each player, depending on his area of expertise, will require a different treatment.
- Lastly, but not less importantly, the message must not be redundant.

C. How should the information be organized?

Through a relevant conductive thread, which will aid the team's assimilation of the information. In this sense, it is important to follow a pre-established script, which is expected by the players, thus facilitating their assimilation. We will describe an example that can be useful for this organization of information:

- **General remarks:** All the information concerning the stadium, environment, referee, etc. that is not included in other sections but that needs to be included in the data offered to the coach and the players.
- **Statistical information:**
  - Focused on the performance observed until the day of the match (current situation).
  - Share what the numbers show about the opposing team:
    - Moments of shape.
    - Situations of success / failure.
    - Performance related to home / visitor status.
    - Performance curve.
    - etc.
  - Statistical information focused on the analysis of goal, be it for or against.
- **Individual analysis:** gathers information about the line-up through an exhaustive analysis of each player.
  - A statistical section may be included.

    - Main characteristics
    - Behaviours during play - attack, defense, transitions, set pieces.
    - Predictive section with probabilities of success/ failure in the hypothetical confrontations with their possible pairs - of our own team.
- **Collective analysis:** This information includes a subjective and an objective part.
    - Description and prescription assessing the opponent's average strong and weak points.
    - What they do and how we can counteract it. This means, coupling a problem with a solution - this can be used as a guide at this point.
    - Pertinent group, sectoral and intersectoral analysis, with the aim of simplifying the ideas without impoverishing the information.

D. How much information should I give to the player?

Scarce, concrete and concise. Do not forget that this information has been worked on and presented during the week and that in this moment it is important to remind them the most significant points.

Those specific and concrete aspects that we regard as pertinent will be reinforced, without overwhelming the players, telling them the strictly necessary for their immediate goal.

Overwhelming them with information at this point could be counter-productive, both at a pedagogical level - by transmitting lack of confidence in them - and at a competitive level - there is some information that helps the coach deal with stress more than it helps the players.

Which leads us to the question: What is the recommended or maximum time?

Although there are theories that post attention levels can only be maintained during 10-15 minutes, the content of the talk, the method and the communication style may be much more relevant than the time we use for the talk. This explains why we can keep our attention through hours when we go to the movies or to a concert.

In conclusion, the *how* determines the *how much*.

E. What players should I give the information to?

Generally, at this point the information is shared with the whole team, although it is true that, depending on some circumstances, it could be necessary to share something with one player or a group of players.

Deciding to share information individually will depend on the psychological characteristics of the player receiving it:

- There are players who need specific reports in order to improve their match plan in contrast to the habitual conditions exhibited by their opponent. They need to know as much as possible about their opponent so as to face the competition in a confident way.

- Others, however, just need to know concrete information in order to face the competition without feeling overwhelmed by details about their opponent.

Each player is unique and will face the competition in his/her own, particular way, which can be extrapolated to the way they receive the information right before the match. Each player will receive the information differently, which is why it is essential to know the particularities of our team at an individual level.
At this point, it is necessary to tackle the specific position of the goalkeeper. It is necessary to take into account if they have a personal trainer or not. The way we handle information will greatly depend on this, which is why we need to have this in mind to include the personal trainer in the whole process, in one way or another.

F. When should I transmit the information?
We will distinguish some key moments before the match:

- During the concentration.
- At the changing rooms, before the warm-up on the pitch.
- At the warm-up on the pitch.
- At the changing rooms, after the warm-up and immediately before the match.

Let us further discuss these moments.

- <u>During the concentration (hotel, trip, etc.)</u>

At this point we have some more time to distribute the information in different means.
Depending on how long these periods of time are, we may get organized in different ways. There are great differences between a concentration where we can meet one day before and one where we meet a few hours before the match.
For example, in the first case we may even have individual or group meetings planned together with the whole coaching staff, where we show concrete, short videos - at the hotel, the day before, the morning of the day of the match, during the previous transfer, etc. On the other hand, if we only have the transfer to the stadium or if we do not even have that time available, we should have provided the information beforehand, so as not to overwhelm the players during the forestate.

- <u>At the changing rooms, before the warm-up.</u>

Everything we do at this point should aim at general and individual motivation of each member of the team, more than at satisfying the need for strategic information-sharing.
The opponent's line-up will be unveiled, which can be used as basic information that can be compared to the one available up to that point. At this instance, our job is really important because the opponent's line-up may not be the same as the one we had anticipated, and even if it was, this is the moment when we highlight the most important lines of action, nuances and details.

Based on the opponent's line-up, we need to assess whether our match plan is still appropriate or we should include some other detail. Of course, taking into account that we should not deviate too much from our original match plan. Doing this may baffle our team, thus arising doubt that may in turn damage our strategy. These previous moments are very fragile and should be treated carefully.

Figure 3: Transmission of information before the warm-up

Source: Martin Saez, 2015, http://bit.ly/35yseIO

- At the warm-up. This moment should not only be used to physically prepare the player for the match, but also to prepare them in other aspects - sociological, technical, tactical, psychological, contextual, etc. Regarding the analyst's intervention at this point, depending on the degree of participation and the dynamics established by the coach, we can help in the transmission of information. For example, we can help design and reproduce evolutions or movements that simulate the match plan (including aspects of the opponent), using members of the coaching staff as opponents (which the analyst may be part of), or including provocation rules.

Figure 4: Transmission of information at the warm-up

Source: Photo: Germán Parga - FC Barcelona, 2019-2020. Unpublished, own file.

- At the changing rooms, after the warm-up and immediately before the match.

  At a group level, we can issue messages aimed at:

  - Enhancing the cohesion level of the group.
  - Enhancing the confidence level.
  - Pinpointing specific peculiarities that serve as a mantra at a collective level to reinforce the mandatory references at the time of the competition.

  At an individual level:

  - The basic objectives of the player.
  - Stirring trust and confidence in their abilities.
  - Very specific references that help them go out with the optimal activation level.

In these moments, the player needs their space to balance body and mind, which is why they should not be disturbed with unnecessary information.
These are times of introspection that each player experiences in a different way.
What has not been said up to this point should not be mentioned because it will not lead to anything fruitful.

1.2 Tools for transmission

Football communication comes since the beginning, from oral communication. Words, explanations and transference through conviction are the bases on which the process of communication lies.
The message should be free any interference or external negativity, both at the emission stage, aspect which depends on the coaches and/or analysts, as at the reception stage, which depends entirely on the player.
The chosen channel has to be appropriate for each moment, being words, images and writing the main elements through which the player will receive whatever the coach wishes to convey. The process of communication will be enhanced by image in all its spectrum of options, granting strength to the message.
The transmission has to be adapted to the receptive capacities of our players. In this sense, transmitting in the wrong "frequency" in lexical, conceptual or content-related terms will only produce unnecessary interference and blurriness.
We should also pay a lot of attention to our body language.
We are what we transmit, which is why there needs to be a correlation between what is said and the way in which it is said, if we want to aid the credibility of our message.
Technique and technology are at the service of the message, neither below nor above it.
We should not forget that our objective is the quick assimilation of such information on the part of the players.
This is why we need to assess which are the most useful tools to use in these moments:

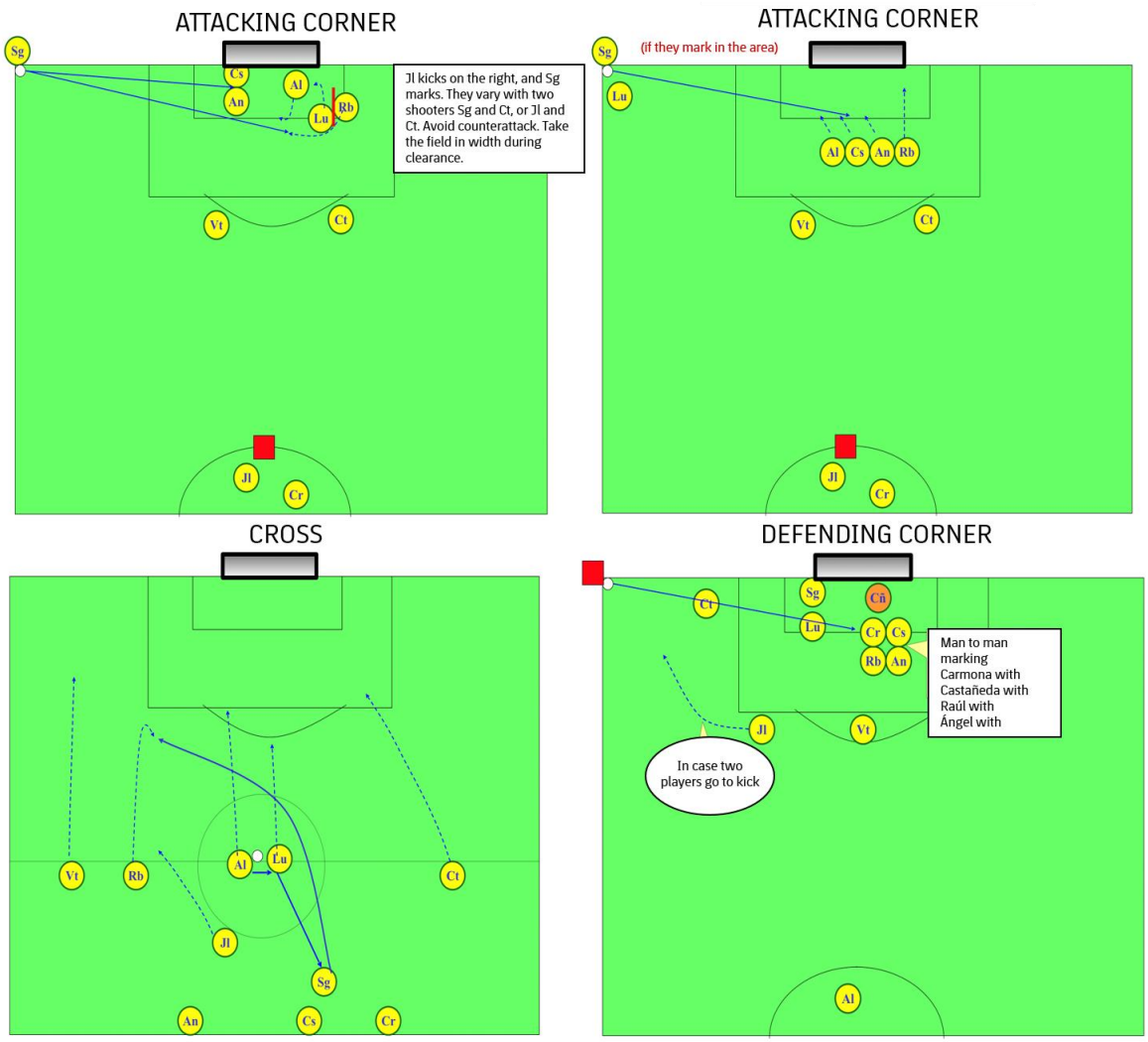
- Presentations: may be the most widely extended one, since it can be prepared with anticipation. The analyst is greatly important for the elaboration of such presentations; in fact, they are usually in charge of preparing them and they may even give them under the coach's supervision.
- Videos. In the same way as with presentations, the analyst is usually the one in charge of providing for the clips that will be shown during the pre-match. In the following section we share some thoughts in this matter taken from Cervera Villena, F. and Coba Sánchez R.'s book (2012): *Football: the player is what matters. The complexity of the human being as the real basis of the game*, which is of the utmost importance when performing such projections.
    - From a neuroscientific perspective, without intending to give any neurological recipes, we consider there are some aspects to order the video-watching session, apart from randomly chosen routines and the standardized times for the projection of images. We should try to look for the Correlational Interpretation of the Model of play. To do this, we start from several basic premises:

- There is a “preseason video” in which the player has to understand and acclimatize themselves to their responsibilities. We should take into account that positivity in those images does not imply a lack of mistakes. Also, we should not associate photos to concepts until some inspection guidelines have been integrated and internalized because in order to perceive a given situation there needs to be a previous understanding of the stages of play, which are more encompassing than concepts. Understanding those moments means understanding when there has been a “useful effort, if there has not been a fearful attitude, if it is known how to get advantage of positions or not. These moments have a socio-affective character, and are tangible in each video-watching session. In this way, perception is prepared before the inspection, being very careful not to producing what Morin defines as “blind intelligence”.
- It is important to develop the explanation in relation to the characteristics of each player. We think that the video should be a tool to foster autonomy. It would be ideal that we got ideas for tasks from the players themselves out of these video-watching session, and that they can solve problems through real communication during the video session. It is known that the development of training scenarios has been carried out with excellent results in senior national teams.
- The objective should be to guide play towards developing a feeling of empathy on the part of the player as well as resilience - the ability to endure and fight against adversity.
- It is important to remember that, at an individual or collective level, images can be organized following the guidelines for creating problem-solving mind maps (Cervera Villana and Coba Sanchez, 2012, p. 250-251).

- <u>Static information at the changing rooms.</u>
  - Photos and graphics. Photography as a complementary element to image will be useful to show and consolidate specific aspects of play that should be dealt with in concrete situations. An image is worth a thousand words, but words carry implicit psychological meanings that can be completed and enhanced through the use of images. These tools are greatly used to show in a quick way the behaviours in the different set pieces (SP). As analysts, we can be asked to produce these tools and show them in these moments, so we should be prepared to do so. The same photos

and graphs can be used during the match to remind these behaviours to the players that go in. The second coach usually these actions with the substitute player just before they go in. Graphs can be developed with easy-access tools such as **PowerPoint** or **Keynote,** as well as with more expensive and complex ones. Photos can also be used to emphasize certain actions or motivate the team or a specific player. Statements to the press, on social networks, etc. made by the opponent are often used to increase the players' motivation. We should be very careful and respectful with these types of tools not to surpass any ethical boundary or motivate the players too much, which can have negative consequences during the game. Below there is an example of graphs about set pieces that can be displayed during the pre-match as well as the match itself.

Figure 5: Set pieces that can be displayed during the pre-match as well as the match itself.



Source: Author's production.

- Spreadsheets. They can encompass from the summary of the match plan to important data about the operative strategy in relation to the opponent.
- Statistics. If appropriate, they aid the understanding of part of the information, which would be more difficult to grasp through other means.
- etc.

- Semi-static information at the changing rooms - sequences of images displayed in a screen or projector.
- It is another way to offer information. It can be really useful since it gives us the possibility of having a previous presentation or sequence of images, and showing them in a loop. The player can check these data while getting ready for the match, at their own speed and need, which makes the process more personal and versatile. As an example, let us imagine a **PowerPoint** presentation similar to the previous graph (Figure 5), presented in a loop where set pieces (for and against) are shown, as well as the match plan or other content.

- Tablets and other electronic devices with individual or collective information. This is a very convenient and useful tool because it allows the player to check information about their habitual opponent in a give match, among other types of information, at any time. Besides, it is a tool that they are all familiarized with, which makes it easier for the players to handle and accept it.

- Written dossier. Written reports should be concrete and precise, providing a formal individual or group explanation, with a clearly stated objective. This is not a time to introduce complex messages, but to remind in a concise way content already dealt with, and perhaps some last-minute details that may come up. This tool may be also useful to gather individual information of all the opposing players, so as to avoid a lack of information in the case of an unexpected change in the opposing team's line-up.
- Others.

Producing and using these tools is one of the main functions of the football analyst.
And we cannot forget the pre-match talks and more or less individual or personal conversations. They are not only habitual, but very important when transmitting our message, especially when considering the number of matches and the difficulty of working on specific content during training sessions.
Although the participation of the analyst here tends to be less frequent, this depends on each staff. Apart from the degree of prominence granted to us, we can also analyse the impact of these talks on the players, and give a constructive and honest feedback with the aim of improving the impact these talks have on players.

References

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Image: Transmission of information at the warm-up. Photo: Germán Parga - FC Barcelona, 2019-2020. Unpublished, own file.

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