

FORMER PLAYERS AS FOOTBALL COACHES IN POLAND

Adam Metelski, Jerzy Kaźmierczyk

Poznan University of Economics and Business, Poland

E-mail: adam.metelski@ue.poznan.pl, jerzy.kazmierczyk@ue.poznan.pl

Abstract

Should sports clubs be managed by former professional athletes? There is a belief in the sports world that team management is a mystery, something that only former players can understand. Some studies indeed indicate that practicing sports may actually predispose a person to also performing managerial functions. The aim of the research was to verify if former professional football players do better than other people as coaches of football clubs. The interest in this topic was due to the fact that like a top manager in a company, a coach is a very important figure in the football club and sport is an important part of the global economy today. The research was based on the top Polish football league – Ekstraklasa. The study covered the years 2015-2020 and during this period, a total of 46 head coaches worked in the analyzed clubs. The results indicate that owners of football clubs often hire former successful athletes, and in the research group their average results were better than others.

Keywords: former professional players, management in football, team performance

Introduction

The importance of this topic is worth emphasizing, as sport is an important part of the global economy today. The value of the global sports market in 2018 amounted to almost half a trillion USD, and it is expected to grow by as much as 25% in the next 4 years (Kutwa & Rafał, 2019). In 2018, the Polish sports market generated almost PLN 10 billion in added value, 109,000 people worked in the field of sport, and the sports industry generated a total of nearly PLN 3 billion in salaries. Out of all types of sport, football is definitely the most popular in Poland, and is practiced by 39.4% of participants of sports clubs (GUS, 2019).

This article focuses on the role of the coach because it is a very important position in a football club. Like a top manager in a company, a coach is a major representative of the owners of a football club. He has responsibilities in many areas and makes diverse strategic and operational decisions which directly affect the team's performance. A coach's activities include among others: selecting game strategies, selecting players for matches, motivating them, and determining which players to buy or sell during a transfer window (Argentieri et al., 2019). Football clubs change coaches relatively frequently, and the search for a new one usually only lasts a few days (Kuper & Szymański, 2017). Usually, club owners do not organize a professional recruitment process for a coach position, but often follow their instincts or rely on advisers. Frequent coach changes occur most often because the club's management wants to quickly improve the team's performance. Some studies indicate that a change of coach may improve team performance (e.g. the new coach may be able to motivate the players better), but others do not confirm this (de Paola & Scoppa, 2012). However, a slow and thoughtful recruitment process, rarely seen in football, can bring positive results, as exemplified by Arsène Wenger's recruitment by Arsenal London in 1996 (Kuper & Szymański, 2017). Arsene Wegner worked at Arsenal for the next 22 years and became a true club legend (Koliński, 2020). Another example of a prudent and patient approach to personnel issues is that of Manchester

United, when in 1990 no decision was made to dismiss the failing manager Alex Ferguson. How right the decision was, is emphasized by the fact that Alex Ferguson won 38 trophies with Manchester United over the course of 26 years (Grabowski, 2020).

There is a belief in the football community that there is something mysterious about team management, something that only former players can understand (Kuper & Szymański, 2017). Of course, former players like this concept because they can always reply to criticism by saying that if someone was never a footballer, he or she has no idea about the functioning of a team. It also seems logical to assume that a former player will better understand how to motivate other players to play well, and since he has achieved success as a footballer, he will be able to repeat it as a coach. However, one of the most famous football coaches today – Jose Mourinho, when being criticized as not being a good footballer in the past, replied: “I don't see a relationship, my dentist is the best specialist in the world, although he has never experienced a serious toothache in his life” (Kuper & Szymański, 2017). Another famous coach, Carlo Ancelotti, a former great footballer, once said: “The football experience helps me only in one situation: I understand what my players think, but the job is different, you have to learn how to be a manager” (Kuper & Szymański, 2017, p. 85). In the perception of football players the most significant qualities of a good coach are: educated, goal-oriented, organized, demanding, knows how to organize a team, and is able to inspire and communicate information (Petrovska et al., 2020). A coach's leadership skills are very important to obtain successful results with a team. It is worth adding, that leadership in sports is not so different from leadership in general (Acet et al., 2017).

Some studies have shown that practicing sport predisposes a person to performing managerial functions (Caudill & Long, 2010; Metelski, 2019). Various authors indicated that practicing sport builds character, promotes discipline and teamwork, and promotes other qualities valued on the labor market (Bailey et al., 2013; Ewing, 1998). Sport can also contribute to build human capital (Jaźwiński, 2017) and affect job satisfaction (Kaźmierczyk & Wyrwa, 2017; Metelski, 2020). Physical activity can also constitute a positive signal and help a person in work. It has been demonstrated that employers more often contacted work candidates who signaled sport-related abilities (Rooth, 2011). Considering the above, it can be assumed that being an ex-footballer makes it easier to become a professional football coach.

It is also worth discussing who manages the Polish Football Association, i.e. the organization supervising all football leagues in Poland. The president of the PFA is Zbigniew Boniek, who played for the Polish national team (80 matches, 24 goals), participated in three World Cups (1978, 1982 – third place, 1986), and had a very successful sports career in the Polish and Italian leagues (PFA, 2020). In addition to President Zbigniew Boniek, the board also includes 3 other notable footballers: Marek Koźmiński (vice-president for coaching), Paweł Wojtala and Radosław Michalski. It can therefore be concluded that former successful footballers have a significant impact on the work of the association supervising football in Poland. The aim of the study was to check how former successful professional footballers perform as coaches as compared to people who either did not play professionally or whose careers were not that successful.

Research Methodology

General Background

This study was conducted on the basis of the top football league in Poland – the Ekstraklasa. The Ekstraklasa is named PKO Ekstraklasa since the 2019–20 season due to its sponsorship by PKO Bank Polski – biggest Polish bank. Sixteen top Polish football league teams play a total of 30 games each. The Ekstraklasa is now operated by the Ekstraklasa S.A. There are some differences in the exact start and end dates of each season, but for the purposes

of this research it was specified that the Ekstraklasa season begins on July 1 and ends on June 30 (lasting for 12 months).

The data used in this study were obtained from the official website of the league (ekstraklasa.org) as well as from many individual websites of the analyzed clubs. Due to the excessive number of websites used, it was decided not to mention all of them, but it should be stated that the data used in the study is available on free specialized sports websites.

Sample Selection

The research group consisted of coaches who worked in the Ekstraklasa from the 2015/2016 season to the 2019/2021 season. The study took into account only those clubs that in the above-mentioned period consistently played in the Ekstraklasa (every season in the Polish premier division, the two worst teams are relegated to a lower league).

Instrument and Procedures

In this study, the football coaches were divided based on their experience as football players. Coaches, who in the past played in a national team or played at the highest level of competition in a given country for at least five years, were called *practitioners*, and coaches without such experience *theorists*. Among the *theorists*, one can also find people who played football in the past, but either for a short time at the highest level (for example Czesław Michniewicz – 9 appearances in the top league) or only at the lower leagues (for example Kosta Runjaić and Ireneusz Mamrot). When analyzing the profiles of all the coaches, it should be noted that almost all of them used to play football themselves, at least in a youth team.

Data Analysis

Microsoft Excel and *IBM SPSS Statistics 26* applications were used to process the quantitative data of research. The obtained data is presented in text and in tables.

Research Results

Being a football coach in a professional league is not a stable job – the results show that it is rare for a coach to work for a club for even one whole season. Table 1 lists the analyzed clubs and the names of the clubs' main coaches in each season. The number in parentheses next to their names indicates the number of months that they were employed at the club in a given season.

Table 1*Coaches in the Clubs of the Polish Ekstraklasa in 2015/2016-2019/2020*

Clubs (number of club coaches)	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Legia War- szawa (12)	Henning Berg (3) Stanisław Czerc- zesow (9)	Besnik Hasi (2.5) Aleksandar Vuković (0.25) Jacek Magiera (9.25)	Jacek Magiera (2.5) Romeo Jozak (7) Dean Klafurić (2.5)	Dean Klafurić (1) Aleksandar Vuković (3.5) Ricardo Sá Pinto (7.5)	Aleksandar Vuković (12)
Lech Poznań (10)	Maciej Skorża (2.5) Jan Urban (9.5)	Jan Urban (2) Nenad Bjelica (10)	Rafał Ulatowski (3) Nenad Bjelica (9)	Ivan Đurđević (4) Adam Nawalka (4) Dariusz Żuraw (4)	Dariusz Żuraw (12)
Piast Gliwice (7)	Radoslav Látal (12)	Radoslav Látal (8) Dariusz Wdow- czyk (4)	Dariusz Wdowczyk (2.5) Waldemar Fornalik (9.5)	Waldemar Fornalik (12)	Waldemar Fornalik (12)
Lechia Gdańsk (9)	Jerzy Brzęczek (2) Thomas von Heesen (3) Piotr Nowak (5.5)	Piotr Nowak (12)	Piotr Nowak (3) Adam Owen (5) Piotr Stokowiec (4)	Piotr Stokowiec (12)	Piotr Stokowiec (12)
Śląsk Wrocław (10)	Tadeusz Pawłowski (5) Romuald Szukielowicz (3) Mariusz Rumak (4)	Mariusz Rumak (5.5) Jan Urban (6)	Jan Urban (7.5) Tadeusz Pawłowski (4.5)	Tadeusz Pawłowski (5.5) Vítězslav Lavička (6)	Vítězslav Lavička (12)
Pogoń Szczecin (6)	Czesław Michnie- wicz (12)	Kazimierz Moskal (12)	Maciej Skorża (4) Kosta Runjaić (8)	Kosta Runjaić (12)	Kosta Runjaić (12)
Cracovia (5)	Jacek Zieliński (12)	Jacek Zieliński (12)	Michał Probierz (12)	Michał Probierz (12)	Michał Probierz (12)
Jagiellonia Białystok (6)	Michał Probierz (12)	Michał Probierz (12)	Ireneusz Mamrot (12)	Ireneusz Mamrot (12)	Ireneusz Mamrot (4) Iwajło Petew (7)
Zagłębie Lubin (8)	Piotr Stokowiec (12)	Piotr Stokowiec (12)	Piotr Stokowiec (5) Mariusz Lewan- dowski (7)	Mariusz Lewan- dowski (4) Ben van Dael (8)	Ben van Dael (2) Martin Ševela (8.5)
Wisła Kraków (10)	Kazimierz Moskal (5) Tadeusz Pawłowski (2) Dariusz Wdowczyk (3.5)	Dariusz Wdow- czyk (4.5) Kiko Ramírez (6)	Kiko Ramírez (5.5) Joan Carrillo (6)	Maciej Stolarczyk (12)	Maciej Stolarc- zyk (4.5) Artur Skow- ronek (7.5)
Korona Kielce (8)	Marcin Brosz (12)	Tomasz Wil- man (4) Maciej Barto- szek (8)	Gino Lettieri (12)	Gino Lettieri (12)	Gino Lettieri (2) Mirosław Smyła (5.5) Maciej Barto- szek (4)
Number of coaches in each season	19	18	21	17	16

Note: Bold font – coaches with no notable experience as players (theorists).

In total, during the analyzed period 46 coaches (including 11 *theorists* and 35 *practitioners*) worked in the 11 above-listed clubs. It can be said that *practitioners* accounted for 76% of all coaches in the analyzed period. Changes occurred frequently (91 in total), but quite a few times a coach dismissed from a given club found employment in another. The highest number of changes took place in the 2017/2018 season (21), and the club with the most changes was the multiple Polish champion – Legia Warszawa (12). This team is so accustomed to winning in the Polish league that each defeat poses a certain threat to the employment of a coach. The average period of employment of a coach in Legia Warszawa was only 5 months. The fewest changes were made in the 2019/2020 season (16), and the club with the longest average employment period of coaches was Cracovia, where there were no changes at this position during the seasons. Only two coaches worked in Cracovia in the analyzed period – the average period of employment was 2.5 years. In all the analyzed clubs, the average period of employment of a coach lasted for 7.25 months, which is slightly more than half a season. It is also worth noting that only men and mainly Poles (26 out of 46) were employed as coaches.

In the further part of the study, it was checked at what position in the league the clubs finished at the end of a given season when led by *theorists* and *practitioners*. Due to numerous changes with coaches in clubs, it was decided that a season could be considered as being led by a *practitioner* or *theoretician* if a given type of coach had been running the club for at least two-thirds of the season (8 months). Detailed data is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
The Club's Place in the League in 2015/2016-2019/2020 and the Coaches' Experience as Players

Clubs	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	Average
Legia Warszawa	1	1	1	2	1	1.2
Lech Poznań	7	3	3	8	2	4.6
Piast Gliwice	2	10	14	1	3	6
Lechia Gdańsk	5	4	13	3	4	5.8
Śląsk Wrocław	10	11	10	12	5	9.6
Pogoń Szczecin	6	7	11	7	6	7.4
Cracovia	4	14	9	4	7	7.6
Jagiellonia Białystok	11	2	2	5	8	5.6
Zagłębie Lubin	3	9	7	6	11	7.2
Wisła Kraków	9	6	6	9	13	8.6
Korona Kielce	12	5	8	10	15	10

■ – *theorist*, ■ – *practitioner*.

In the analyzed period, *practitioners* on average finished at place 5.73 in the league at the end of the season ($SD = 3.74$), and *theorists* at place 7.83 ($SD = 4.05$). Despite some differences, it cannot be said that they are statistically significant – as indicated by the Student's t-test for independent samples $t(49) = -1.869$; $p = .068$. Table 2 also shows which teams were the best on average in the analyzed period. By far the best team was Legia Warszawa, which was the four-time champion, and only once finished second. The weakest team was Korona Kielce, which ended the season in the 10th place on average. Looking at these two teams, a person can notice significant differences, because Legia was led mainly by *practitioner* coaches, and Korona Kielce is the only team that employed only *theorist* coaches. The average positions of these clubs may also be an indication of the importance of previous experience as a player in the work of a coach, or indicate how difficult it is to find employment in good clubs without this type of experience.

Discussion

There is a belief in the football community that there is something mysterious in team management, something that only former professional footballers can deal with (Kuper & Szymański, 2017). The example of Poland confirms the existence of this belief because the owners of football clubs in Poland were indeed much more likely to hire former professional footballers (so-called *practitioners*) as coaches (35 out of 46 in the analyzed period). Interestingly *practitioners* were also more often employed in the more successful teams (see two Polish top clubs: Legia Warszawa and Lech Poznań). The aim of this study, however, was to verify if former professional football players do better than other people as coaches of football clubs. In the study group, being a so-called *practitioner* was associated with achieving a better place in the league, but despite the differences, it cannot be said that they are statistically significant. It is worth referring to some of the earlier studies that showed that the vast majority of coaches seem to have no influence on their teams' performance and do not stay in their positions for long (Kuper & Szymański, 2017). On the other hand, other authors argued that coaches are more important, especially as demonstrated by comparing football with other industries (Anderson & Sally, 2014). Relatively rarely, in the literature of the subject, one can find studies devoted to examining whether former players are doing better than others in the position of a coach. Our research shows that football experience can be linked to better results as a coach.

Another important result is that being a coach in the best football league in Poland is not a stable profession. There seems to be a similar pattern in other professional leagues (de Dios Tena & Forrest, 2007). It rarely happened that one coach worked at the club for the entire season. Usually, there were changes during the season, and this does not only apply only to the worst teams, because the highest number of changes with the position of the coach took place in the best team – Legia Warszawa. As previously stated, Legia Warszawa became so accustomed to winning in Poland that each defeat acts as a threat to the coach's position. Frequent changes of coaches probably result from the belief that the new coach will be able to motivate players better and this will improve the team's results. Therefore, club owners in the poorer period of the team's season often decide to make such a move. It is also usually relatively easier for owners to change coach than hire or fire many players. Examples of well-known coaches from the English league – Arsene Wenger and Alex Ferguson, however, indicate that sometimes it is worth being patient, because in the long term a coach is able to fully demonstrate his skills. These coaches were working in their clubs for over twenty years. Currently the longest-employed coach in the Ekstraklasa club is Michał Probiez, who has worked in Cracovia for the last three seasons.

In subsequent studies, it would be worth extending the analysis to other variables, such as the club's budget, the size of the town in which the club is located, the value of the players, etc. These variables also affect the team's position in the league to a different extent. It would

also be worth checking whether former professional athletes are also likely to be employed as coaches in other sport disciplines, and verify if they achieve better results than other people at this position.

Conclusions

A coach plays a very important role in a football club. He is the direct manager of the players and often acts as an intermediary between the players and the board members. His duties include: choosing the match squad, conducting preparations for matches, as well as ensuring the appropriate motivation and attitude of the players. The aim of the study was to verify if former professional football players do better than other people as coaches of football clubs. The research was based on the top Polish football league. The focus was on having experience as a football player because there is a belief in the football environment that this type of experience is very helpful in the work of a coach. The results of the study confirm the existence of this belief, because in Poland, club owners are more likely to hire people who had a very successful sports career in the past. Furthermore, in the study group, clubs led by former notable footballers achieved better results than clubs led by coaches without this type of experience. However, despite the differences, it cannot be said that they are statistically significant. It is also worth adding that the work of a coach in the professional league is not a stable occupation, and a coach was rarely able to lead his club throughout the whole season. In all the analyzed clubs, the average period of a coach's employment was only 7.25 months, which is slightly more than half a season.

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Adam Metelski	PhD, Assistant Professor, Poznań University of Economics and Business, al. Niepodległości 10, 61-875 Poznań, Poland. E-mail: adam.metelski@ue.poznan.pl ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1016-7579
Jerzy Kaźmierczyk (Corresponding author)	PhD, Assistant Professor, Poznan University of Economics and Business, Poznan, Zielona Góra, Poland. E-mail: jerzy.kazmierczyk@ue.poznan.pl ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5976-0210