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SPORT OBSERVATIONS

Briefing Paper | January 2026

A DATA-DRIVEN SET PIECE BRIEFING FOR MOTHERWELL FOOTBALL AND ATHLETIC CLUB

Alfie Beckett, Toby Elkins, Ali Pearson (Dr), Gian Marco Campagnola (Dr) and Yasmin Hengster (Dr)

Recommendations

(i)**Recommendation 1 - Defending Corners:**
Maximising counterattacking strength from defensive corners could prove a successful defensive strategy for MFC. This aligns with the fact that, while not being one of the strongest aerial teams, MFC have talented counterattacking players (e.g. Longelo and Just). Leaving Longelo and Just as well as Koutroumbis in attacking positions from defensive corners would reduce the number of opposition players in our defensive box, reducing opposition threat and expanding our own.

(ii)**Recommendation 2 - Attacking Corners:**
The evidence from the data is that MFC find more success when attacking wider areas of the box from attacking corners (e.g. flick-ons, near and far post). Having Just and Stamatelopoulos in wider, less fixed positions could help to increase the xG of attacking corners while limiting the number of offensive transitions conceded.

Introduction

1. This project explores ways in which Motherwell FC can develop their set pieces strategies, specifically on corners. As well as identifying ways that MFC could increase their threat with attacking corners, our study focused on finding ways to create chances from defensive corners by identifying which players MFC should leave in a counterattacking position to develop quick attacking transitions.

2. The report starts by reviewing assumptions about the importance of height in aerial duels, which then led to more detailed research into the current performance of MFC at both ends of the pitch, as well as the performance of other teams and the particular threats they pose. As a result of this research, we have been able to propose multiple avenues for escalating the MFC attacking threat, as well as ways to reduce the opposition's threat to the MFC goal.

Purpose

3. Authors were also able to produce a functioning tool that could allow MFC to check for any of the data points used in this report for any opponents they have. Our filtering tool can be used to produce any table, chart and graph included in this report for each opponent. The purpose of the briefing paper is to help Motherwell Football Club understand how our tool could be used to further optimise corner kick set pieces and consider adopting it in the future.

Background

4. The information presented does not attempt to be exhaustive but presents a small but important insight into corner kick set pieces enacted by Motherwell Football Club between Game Week 1 and 14.

5. The authors worked under the supervision of Dr Gian Marco Campagnolo, Senior Lecturer at the Academy of Sport of the University of Edinburgh and Director of the Data Analyst training programme at The Italian Football Association (FIGC) and Yasmin Hengster, PhD at the University of Edinburgh, winner of the StatsBomb and Opta football data competition and former Arsenal Women's and English FA data analyst.

6. To develop tactical analyses that respond to the coaches' playing style, football clubs increasingly acquire tactical data analyst capacity of their own. A data analyst at a football club works directly on the data distributed by data feed companies such as Opta, Hudl or IMPECT to develop bespoke analyses on demand for the coaching staff and the recruitment department. Given the confidential nature of the insights, most clubs are moving away from external sport consultancy to build their own internal data department.

7. The specific briefing for Motherwell Football Club uses data supplied by IMPECT and includes data points from each game played in the SPFL by each team from Game Week 1 to 14.

8. The report is structured around the following themes (i) Height Review; (ii) Corner Analysis and (iii) Attacking Transitions prior to concluding.

Height Review

9. To conduct this analysis, we first wanted to explore the relationship between height and aerial dual success in the SPFL, to determine whether there was a significant correlation between height and success. We can see from Figure 1 above that not many Motherwell FC players (yellow dots) are very successful in aerial duels (success was arbitrarily determined as an aerial dual win rate of greater than 60%).

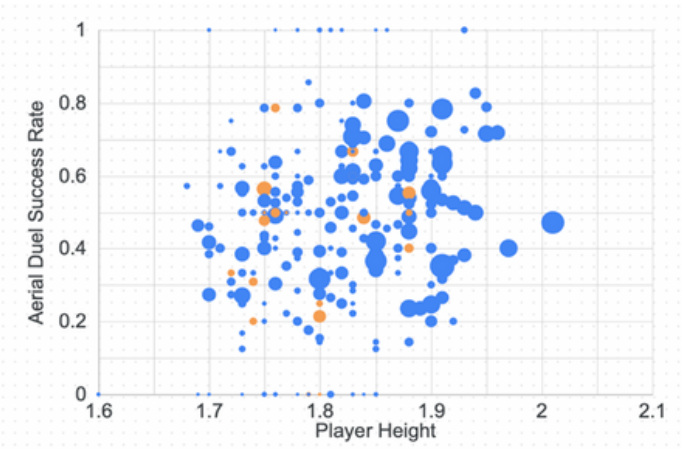


Figure 1 shows the correlation between player height and aerial dual success in the SPFL. Also, dot size = number of duels. Player height is in metres.

10. The graph also shows that taller players compete in the most aerial duels (as the biggest circles, which display the number of duels, are towards the right of the graph); however, we can see that this does not correlate to increased success. We also wanted to see whether the height difference between players involved in aerial duels correlated with their success in the air. This did not show the linear relationship that might be expected, which would suggest that the taller player in a duel would win it, although we emphasise the low frequency of duels at height differences >25cm (Figure 2).

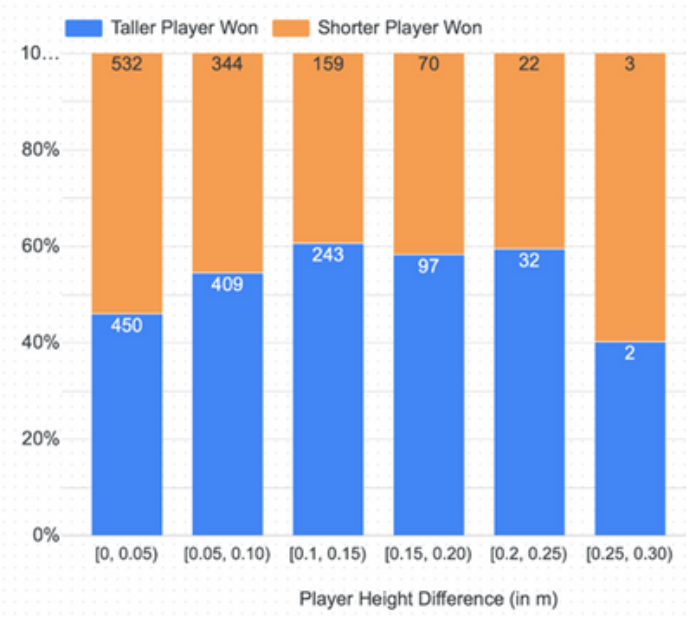


Figure 2 displays the percentage of aerial duels won by players at different height differences, ranging from 0cm difference to 30cm difference.

11. This section demonstrated that height is not necessarily an important factor to consider when choosing which players should be defending from corners. These findings show that MFC are not at a disadvantage just for having a smaller squad than other teams in the league, yet they also meant that it was important to introduce other factors that could help to maximise MFC threat at both ends of the pitch.

Corner Analysis

12. The table at page 4 (Table 1, next page) displays the most successful corner end zone for MFC (corner end zone = where the ball was played into from the corner kick, see Fig.3 next page), from both left and right-sided corners (done to get an overall picture of MFC corners), with success judged by the average xG of the corners.

Corner End Zone	Frequency	Subsequent Counter Attacks	Avg. shot xG
Flick on	2	0	0.18
Far post - wide	6	1	0.05
Near post - wide	8	3	0.03
Central - close	7	3	0.02
Central - wide	5	2	0.02
Open play	14	4	0.01
Far post - close	1	0	0
Far post - back of box	2	0	0
Central - back of box	1	1	0
Opposite side 1	1	0	0

Table 1 shows the frequency, subsequent counterattacks and average xG of different corner types from both sides used by MFC.

13. We can see from Table 1 that MFC have a high average xG from corners played into the "flick on" end zone (the area outside the 6-yard box on the side closest to the corner taking side - see Figure 3). However, there have only been 2 corners taken in this fashion by MFC in the first 14 games of the league. MFC could use this data to maximise their threat from corners and try to use flick-ons and far post - wide corners more compared to open play corners, which they use far more often, but lead to a much lower average xG.

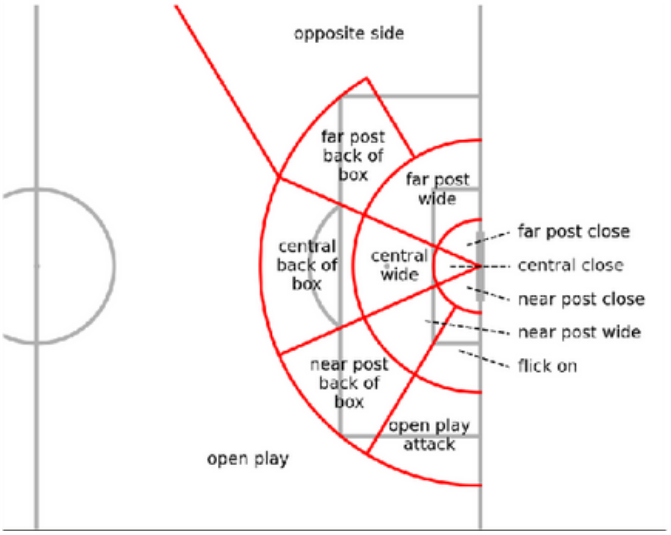


Figure 3 displays corner end zones in the IMPECT Glossary.

14. The interactive tool we created allows to review corners and find which were most successful for each team in the league, as well as MFC. The interactive tool allows the operator to filter for each team in the SPFL, and for both right-sided and left-sided corners, to get a more detailed review of a team's corner tactics. These functionalities allow MFC to prepare for upcoming opponents by knowing in which situations they were threatening. However, the tool we created also allows us to find weaknesses in opposition corners by exploring which corner types they were susceptible to counterattacks from.

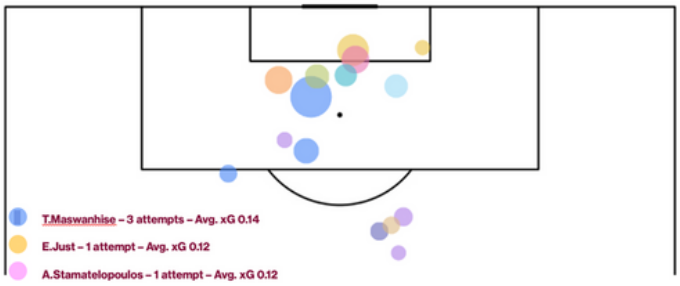


Figure 4 shows the xG when a corner ended in a shot for MFC

15. Figure 4 above shows the xG when an attacking corner ended in a shot for MFC. The bubble size shows the xG of the shot, and the figure can be used to display which players are best at attacking corners, and where they are finding the most success. For example, MFC's highest xG shot from a corner came from T. Maswanhise between the penalty spot and 6-yard box. He has also had some success from the edge of the box. We can also see that E. Just has found success inside the 6-yard box, particularly at the front post area. This graph can help to explore where MFC players should be attacking/shaping their runs but can also be used to filter for opposition teams, to see where their players are finding the most success, and therefore where MFC defenders should be looking to defend, limiting threat.

Name	Height (m)	Total	Won	Success
Lukas Fadinger	1.76	14	11	79%
Liam Gordon	1.83	21	14	67%
John Koutroumbis	1.83	10	6	60%
Paul McGinn	1.75	39	22	56%
Stephen Welsh	1.88	29	16	55%
Callum Hendry	1.76	16	8	50%
Luca Ross	1.77	2	1	50%
Oscar Priestman	1.75	2	1	50%
Stephen O'Donnell	1.88	8	4	50%
Apostolos Stamatelopoulos	1.84	31	15	48%
Elliot Watt	1.75	21	10	48%
Emmanuel Longelo	1.88	15	6	40%
Ibrahim Said	1.72	9	3	33%
Elijah Just	1.74	13	4	31%

Table 2 shows MFC players height, their total number of aerial duels, the number of aerial duels won, and the success rate (%)

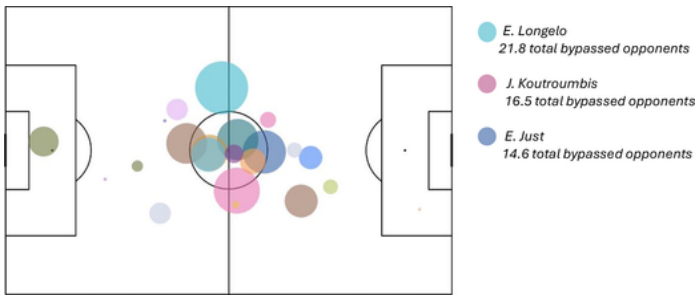
16. While Figure 3 maybe useful for finding the best players for attacking corners - so far in the season Motherwell concede more corners (70) than the one they won (60) - Table 2 can provide better information for defending players. It displays each MFC player's height, their total number of aerial duels in all aspects of play (open play, set pieces, etc.), how many of these duels they have won and finally the success rate (taken from total and won, to make the data easier to understand). The table is sorted via most successful aerial duellists. Height has been included in the table, as while we have discussed that height may not be a particularly important factor in deciding aerial dual success, it is still considered by many to be useful when deciding marking couples (e.g. big on big, etc.). This table can also be used to filter for other SPFL teams to find who are the most successful aerial duellists for upcoming opponents, so we can identify who our best duellists need to mark (e.g. L. Fadinger and L. Gordon on opponents' best players).

Attacking Transitions

17. As shown earlier in this report (see Figure 1), MFC are not one of the strongest aerial teams, and therefore it could be proposed that maximising our counterattacking strength from defensive corners could prove a successful defensive strategy. A successful application of this strategy is provided in Figure 5, with Brighton leaving three players near the halfway line in a defensive corner situation.

Figure 5 shows Brighton leaving 3 men high up against Arsenal in a recent game.

18. Figure 6 displays the best dribblers in attacking transition for MFC. These statistics are not isolated to counterattacks from defensive corners as the dataset would be too small (not many players would have dribbled in attacking transition from a defensive corner), and we produced this graph to inform our recommendations, and therefore wanted to keep the scope as wide as possible. We also chose to only use dribbling statistics as it is more regular for players to dribble instead of pass in attacking transition, especially on the back of a defensive corner. The number of bypassed opponents is decimal because it also considers factors including pressure on the player.



19. Figure 6 along with other data e.g. Table 2, can be used to recommend which players MFC should leave in a counterattacking position from defensive corners. For example, E. Longelo is arguably the best dribbler in attacking transitions and has one with the lowest aerial duel. This evidence suggest Longelo should be left in an attacking position where he can pose a threat. This is similar to Just, yet dissimilar to Koutroumbis, who, despite being effective at dribbling past opponents in attacking transition, he is also the 3rd best at MFC at aerial duals

Concluding Comment

20. The purpose of this report is to find alternative routes that MFC could use to limit the opposition's attacking threat, but at the same time expand their own threat, whether that be directly from attacking corners or in transition from defensive corners. In doing this, we have also produced a functioning tool that MFC can use weekly to review upcoming opponents and gain insights into their current tactics and outstanding performers (in aerial duels, attacking transitions, etc.) to limit their chances of scoring.

21. While further analysis could be useful, both data and video, to provide support for the claims, this project has provided an introductory briefing to aspects of Motherwell FC's current corner strategy and provided some further analysis of some challenges.

Sports Observation Editors
Professor Grant Jarvie, Dr Yujun Xu, Minquan Xiong & Chang Su
Grant Jarvie (Director, Academy of Sport) Grant.Jarvie@ed.ac.uk

Suggested Citation:
Beckett, A., Elkins, T., Pearson, D., Campagnola, G.M., Hengster., Y (2026) "A Data-Driven Set Piece Briefing for Motherwell Football and Athletic Club". Edinburgh: Academy of Sport- University of Edinburgh.

Academy of Sport
University of Edinburgh
Moray House School of Education and Sport
Holyrood Campus
St Leonard's Land
Edinburgh, Scotland UK
EH8 8AQ