

World Cup 2018

Passing the ball behind opponents from the five areas on the field.

For my research into scoring patterns I created three categories of goals in Open Play, one of which was 'Playing the ball behind the defence or to a player level with the last defender', what I refer to as the 'Ball Behind' category.

Figure 1 shows the areas on the field where passes originate in this category.



Figure 1. Areas on the field

Table 1 shows the goals scored from passes in Zone 14+ as a percentage of all goals in this category. The range is from 58% to 69% over the four World Cups.

Table 1. Goals scored from passes from Zone 14+ in four World Cups.

| | WC 2006 | WC 2010 | WC 2014 | WC 2018 |
|----------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Zone 14+ | 31/45 69% | 32/54 59% | 36/61 59% | 25/43 58% |

Table 2 shows the number of attempts at goal from each area in the 2018 World Cup. The number of attempts (85) from Zone 14+ represents 52% of the total (165), which is similar to the 58% of goals scored in this category.

Table 2. Attempts at goal from each area in 2018 World Cup

| | Own Half | Wide Right | Zone 14+ | Wide Left | Inside PA |
|---------|----------|------------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|
| WC 2018 | 17 10% | 28 17% | 85/165 52% | 16 10% | 19 11% |

Figure 2 shows the actual number of goals in each World Cup scored from passes made in each of the five areas.

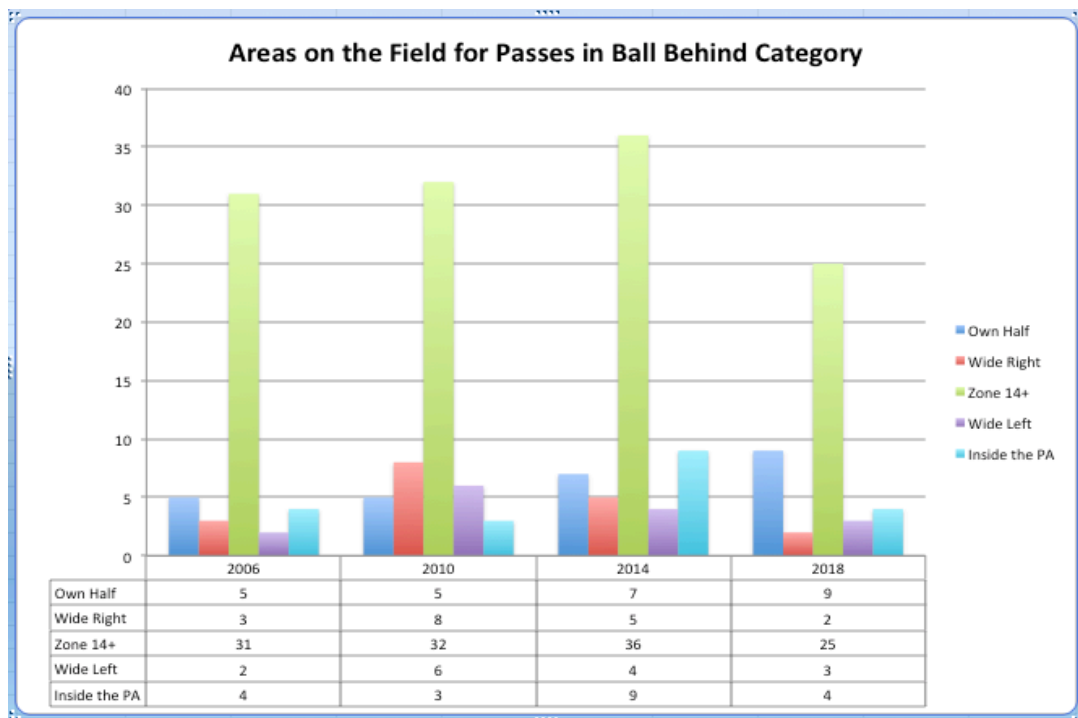


Figure 2. Goals scored in each World Cup from the five areas on the field.

The distribution of goals in the 'Ball Behind' category in Figure 2 is common in all levels of football that I have analysed including European Championships, Asia Cups, the English Premier League and the 'A' League. The number of goals from Zone 14+ is usually more than the combined total from the other four areas.

Another level of analysis of goals originating in Zone 14+ is the type of delivery; above or below head height, see Figure 3.

In the 2014 World Cup 36 goals were scored from a pass originating in Zone 14+, 27 of them were below head high (75%) and 9 were above head high (25%), of which 3 were scored with headers.

In the 2018 World Cup there were 25 goals from a pass originating in Zone 14+, 17 of them were below head high (68%) and 8 were above head high (32%), of which 4 were scored with headers.

In 2018 I also analysed the attempts at goal in each of the three categories of goals. In the 'Ball Behind' category there were 82 attempts from Zone 14+ out of a total of 158. The number of attempts from passes below head high from Zone 14+ was 49 (60%) with 33 (40%) above head high; of which 8 were headers.

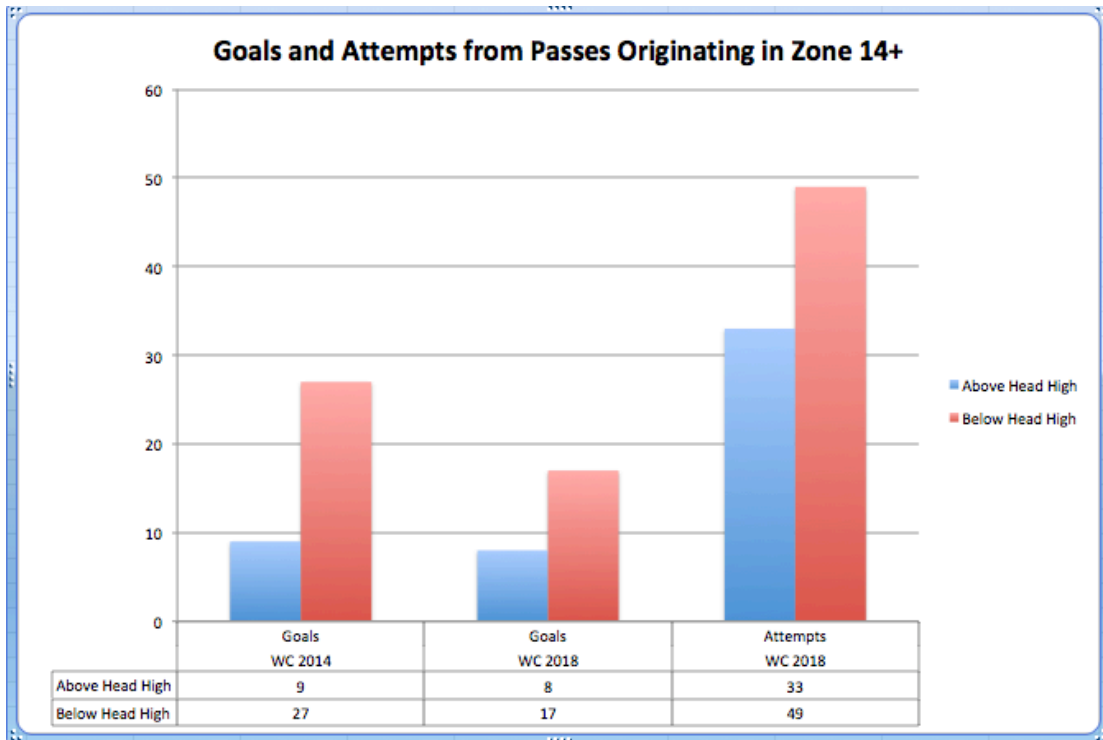


Figure 3. Type of delivery from Zone 14+ for goals and attempts at goal

The success rate of scoring from passes below head high in Zone 14+, (17 goals from 66 attempts, 1:3.8) was slightly better than the ratio of goals from passes above head high (8 goals from 41 attempts, 1:5.1)

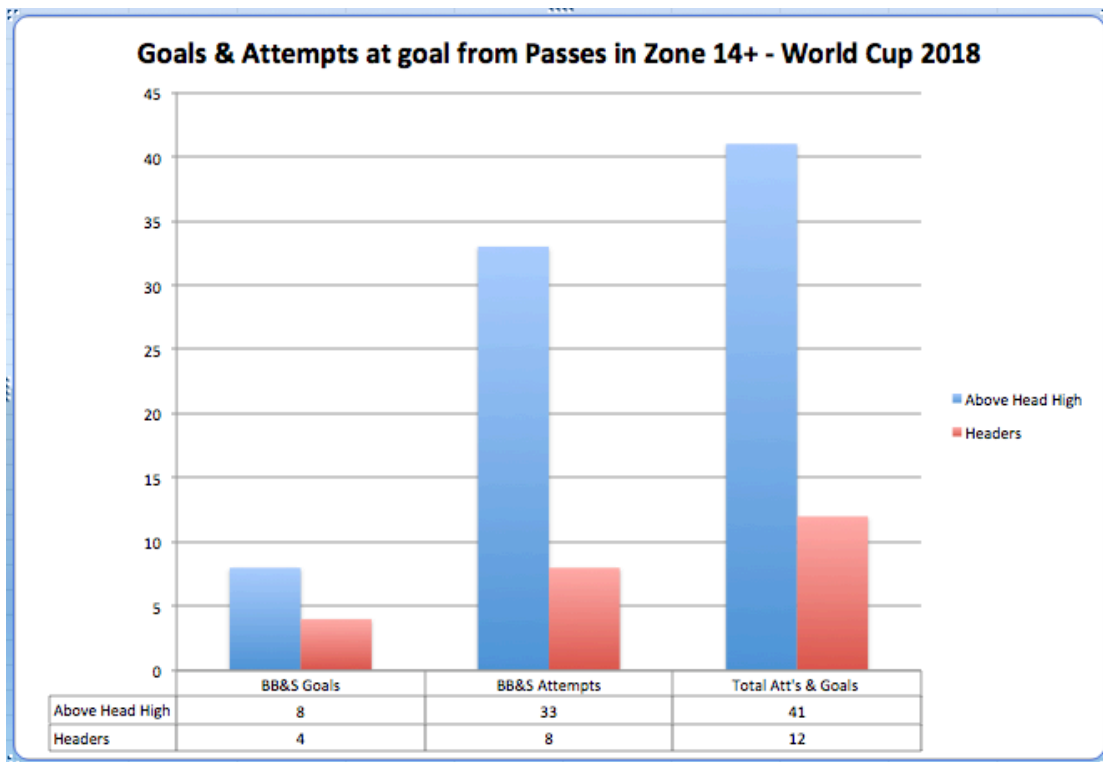


Figure 4. Goals & Attempts at goal including headers from passes above head high in Zone 14+.

Of the 41 attempts at goal from passes above head height from Z14+, 12 were from headers that resulted in 4 goals, which is a success rate of 1: 3. If the attempts at goal from headers are subtracted from the total of 41, the success rate of scoring with the feet is 1:7 (4 goals in 29 attempts). This is an interesting statistic because there were only 11 goals from headers in Open Play in the 2018 World Cup.

It is a fact that 7 of the 11 goals from headers were in the 'Ball Behind' category, (4 from Zone 14+, 1 from Wide Left and 2 from Inside the Penalty Area), 2 more were from 'Other Methods' and 2 came from 'Crosses', that is from the area outside the penalty area and within 20 yards of the goal line. It is worth noting that 11 goals were scored from Crosses and only 2 were from headers.

As a matter of interest 23 goals were scored from headers out of the total of 69 from Set Plays. If we take the 23 penalties out of the equation, because nobody scores a penalty with a header, 50% of Set Plays (23/46) were scored from headers compared with 11% in Open Play. Food for thought!

Implications for Coaches

The importance of trying to play behind the opposition from inside Zone 14+ cannot be emphasised enough. Players need to be educated to look for opportunities to play in behind whenever they get the ball in Zone 14+ and can pass forwards. Even when in doubt I would advocate helping the ball on, in behind, rather than risk getting caught in possession.

Passing the ball behind the defence below head height produced a higher success rate of scoring (1:4) than passing the ball above head height (1:5), but the success rate of scoring from headers compared with the feet for passes made above head height was 1:3 compared with 1:7, so the techniques of chipping the ball and making lofted passes from Zone 14+ should be practised in conjunction with players making forward runs and heading the ball. More goals were scored by heading the ball from passes originating in Zone 14+ than from crossing the ball.

I believe players need to be taught how and when to make runs into Zone 14+ so they increase the opportunities to play forward by facing forwards when they receive the ball. This applies to players moving forwards to receive the ball as well as players in advanced positions coming back to receive a pass that can be played forwards. This is quite a different challenge to being told, 'get between the lines', which is vague and often leads to players going forwards too early and playing with their backs to goal, the complete opposite of what you really want.

Players 'off the ball' should make runs to the back of the defence when (a) they see a team mate will be able to play the ball behind, (b) when they can see the defender and he is not looking at them (i.e. when he looks at the player in possession) and (c) when the ball can be played into space where the goalkeeper isn't favourite to win the ball.

It is important for players to practice passing forwards and receiving under pressure in tight areas because that is typical of what happens in Zone 14+. I created 'The Box' practice for this reason, which can be found on my [website](#).

My next article will focus on the number of passes preceding goals scored, which is a topic that has been given enormous coverage since the days of Charles Reep, the pioneer of notational analysis in the 1950's and 60's, followed by the often debated but equally significant contribution of Charles Hughes in the 1980's with 'The Winning Formula'.