



Research Flash: Artificial Intelligence in Professional Football – The Faster Thinker Wins

Football is undergoing a profound transformation through the use of artificial intelligence (AI). Traditionally shaped by intuition and experience, top clubs are increasingly relying on data-driven analysis to decode tactical patterns and identify talent. This technology also enables smaller clubs to scout more efficiently and remain competitive. Switzerland faces the challenge of integrating AI into its strategies to keep pace internationally.

AI is Changing Football: From Data to Decisions

Football, long dominated by intuition and experience, is now being deciphered by algorithms. Fractions of a second determine victory or defeat – and artificial intelligence could now shape precisely these moments. Leading clubs such as Liverpool FC, Sevilla FC, and Chelsea FC have recognized the potential and are strategically leveraging AI to analyze opponents, refine tactical patterns, and develop their players. In collaboration with tech giants like IBM and Google DeepMind, data analysis is being revolutionized: billions of game sequences are processed in seconds, weaknesses are exposed, and strategies are refined in real time – faster, more precise, and more efficient than ever before.

But this is just the beginning. The next generation of AI will not only perfect match tactics or optimize training methods – it could completely redefine the scouting and recruitment process. Experts are already speaking of a «democratization» of talent discovery: algorithms enable an objective assessment of promising players, independent of geographic or financial barriers. A currently unknown talent from South America or Africa could appear on the radar of Europe's top clubs tomorrow through AI-driven analysis.

The Cost Factor: Success Remains Expensive

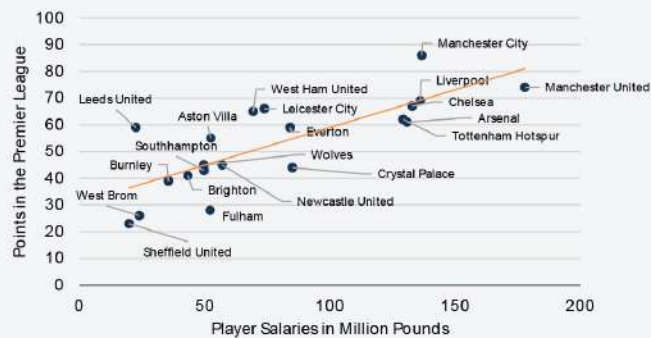
Success in football comes at a cost – and the correlation between budget and sporting performance is undeniable. According to the Wage Cost Hypothesis, player salaries are the strongest single predictor of sporting success: higher wages attract better players, and better players increase the chances of winning titles. It's no surprise that personnel costs represent the largest expense for football clubs

Over the past decade, the share of salary expenses in total revenue has increased in four of Europe's five biggest leagues – despite growing income from ticket sales, TV rights, and sponsorships. Many clubs are already operating at or beyond UEFA's recommended 70% threshold for sustainable wage structures. To curb escalating costs, the new Squad Cost Rule has been introduced, imposing stricter regulations on player salaries and transfer spending. However, the fundamental issue remains: top talent is scarce, and the race for the best players continues to drive prices higher.

Despite the sharp rise in transfer fees, the success rate remains sobering. Almost half of all transfers fail – financially unprofitable and often a sporting disappointment. Given this risk, clubs are increasingly focusing on youth talent. Young players are not only cheaper but also offer significant potential for high future transfer revenues – a crucial lever for maintaining long-term competitiveness.

FIGURE 1

Relationship between EPL Points and Salaries in the Premier League

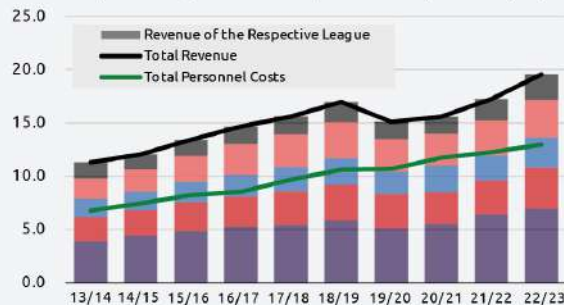


Remark: The following figure shows the total points of Premier League teams and their spending on player salaries in the year 2021. Source: Data from The Economics of Sport, smzh.ag

FIGURE 2

Wage Costs are Rising Faster Than Total Revenue

Panel A: Revenue of Europe's Five Largest Football Leagues from 2013/14 to 2022/23, in Billion EUR



Panel B: Share of Personnel Costs in Revenue of the Five Largest Leagues from 2013/14 to 2022/23, in %



Source: Data from the leagues, Deloitte, smzh.ag

AI Democratization: New Opportunities for Talents and Clubs

Scouting has long been resource-intensive and subjective – but AI technology is changing the game. Platforms like AiScout and Tonsser allow players worldwide to showcase their skills digitally. By uploading videos covering dribbling, passing, finishing, and defensive actions, AI-powered systems analyze performance data and compare it to professional benchmarks. The result: an objective evaluation based on precise performance metrics.

Players not only receive a detailed assessment of their strengths and weaknesses but also targeted improvement suggestions. The analysis covers parameters such as ball control, passing accuracy, dribbling skills, and sprint speed, comparing these values with professional players. The generated performance profile can be accessed by clubs and scouts worldwide – offering a real chance for talents from remote regions who have previously been overlooked.

This development creates new opportunities for smaller clubs that previously couldn't afford extensive scouting networks. With limited budgets, traditional scouting has been financially out of reach for many teams. AI-driven tools are now a game-changer, providing access to a global talent pool and filtering players through data-driven analysis. While wealthy clubs invest in proprietary AI systems to secure a strategic advantage, smaller clubs now have the opportunity to identify talent efficiently and cost-effectively. In this race for the best players, one thing matters most – whoever identifies talent faster, wins.

What Does This Mean for Switzerland?

Switzerland faces a critical challenge: while clubs like FC Basel and Young Boys focus on talent development, the pressure from financially stronger leagues continues to grow. However, artificial intelligence could be a game-changer in this context.

Data-driven technologies enable clubs to identify and develop talent earlier, providing a cost-effective alternative to expensive transfers. Additionally, AI expands the talent pool by making players from amateur leagues or lesser-known regions more visible.

To remain competitive internationally, Swiss clubs must combine innovation with tradition and integrate data-driven strategies into their scouting and training processes. Those who fail to embrace AI risk falling behind.



Scouting in Switzerland: A Look at Costs and Structures

Swiss football clubs operate with limited scouting budgets. In many clubs, the scouting department consists of just two to three people, who must identify talent with restricted resources. While global player statistics are readily available at a low cost, clubs often lack the capacity for in-depth data analysis and interpretation.

However, data-driven scouting services are increasingly helping Swiss clubs optimize their processes. Footballytics offers not only tactical match analysis but also a data scouting service, providing position-specific evaluations and performance assessments. The goal is not to algorithmically determine the «best» player – as this would be neither feasible nor sufficient – but rather to narrow down the vast pool of potential talent efficiently and objectively in the pre-scouting phase. The final decision still rests with the scouts, whose experience and expertise remain essential. The efficiency and affordability of this data-driven approach is evident in the cost: 399 CHF per position for such an analysis.

The increasing professionalization of scouting education further highlights that human intuition and experience are not being replaced by data, analytics, or AI, but rather enhanced. The Goaltrades Academy offers Switzerland's first scouting course, providing football enthusiasts with a pathway into the profession. A key focus is the effective and meaningful use of data in the scouting process – a fundamental pillar for the future of modern scouting.

Outlook: The Race for the Future

Professional football is on the brink of a paradigm shift – the future will be data-driven. Artificial intelligence will revolutionize scouting, offering clubs new ways to gain a competitive edge. In an ultra-competitive environment, where championships, international success, and league survival often come down to fine margins, precise, data-driven talent assessment could be the decisive advantage.

AI does not replace human expertise – it enhances it. Scouting becomes more efficient, objective, and scalable. This presents a unique opportunity for smaller football nations like Switzerland to remain competitive on the global stage, identifying talent early before wealthier leagues lure them away.

Those who adopt the right technologies will not only secure a strategic advantage but may also gain the crucial moment to discover the next Lionel Messi – before anyone else does. The key question remains: Who thinks faster, acts smarter – and wins the race for the future?

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smzh ag
Tödistrasse 53, CH-8002 Zürich
+41 43 355 44 55
contact@smzh.ch
www.smzh.ch

