

How to emerge a hero from the tension of a World Cup penalty shootout

By Simon Kuper

December 3, 2022

Source: <https://www.ft.com/content/de30d678-844a-4232-9f76-86ebe4b4490b>

How to take a penalty and how to save one? With the knockout stages of the World Cup starting on Saturday, these questions could decide who wins the trophy. In the 2018 tournament, four games in the knockout rounds were tied after 120 minutes and won in a penalty shootout. This time, some teams have prepared better than ever. Others don't.

The first thing you need to know is how your opponents shoot. Generally speaking, each kicker must answer one question: do you wait until the goalie moves? The Croatian Luka Modrić yes. He runs up slowly, head up, watching the guardian for the slightest indication, even a raised heel, of where he will move. At that moment, Modrić touches the ball in the other direction. He has converted 21 of the 24 penalties of his career, or 88 per cent, according to Transfermarkt. The conversion rate across football has dropped over the past decade from 82 percent to around 75 percent, probably because data analysis helps teams figure out opposing kickers.

A goalkeeper facing Modrić, or Poland's Robert Lewandowski, will want to stay stationary for as long as possible. That worked for Uruguay's Sergio Rochet against Ghana on Friday: not fooled by André Ayew's slow approach, he chose the right corner, helping Uruguay through to the round of 16 at the expense of the Ghanaians.

England's leading penalty taker, Harry Kane, requires a different method, because he doesn't look at the goalkeeper. His former club manager, José Mourinho, once said: "Harry decides. . . a few days before the game how he's going to take it and then he spends three or four days before the game practicing that shot and I love that." Kane varies the direction of his penalties well, so a goalkeeper should pick a side more or less at random and dive instantly. Good luck: Kane's conversion rate is 85 percent.

Minor kickers sometimes vacillate between Kane's strategy and Modrić's. One example is Frenchman Antoine Griezmann, who has missed five of his last seven shots from the penalty spot.

Argentina's Lionel Messi also has a flaw in his approach that will be apparent to analysts who study the sequences rather than simply counting how many penalties are taken at which corner: he rarely replays his last shot. Last week, Messi scored to the right of the Saudi keeper, then fired a well-placed shot to the left of Poland's Wojciech Szczęsny, who saved. The best footballer in the world has a clearly average career penalty conversion rate of 77 per cent, according to Transfermarkt. His rival, Portugal's Cristiano "Penaldo" Ronaldo, is six percentage points better.

But these are specialists, and in penalty kicks a team must choose five kickers. Players who normally never take penalties suddenly find themselves making the long and lonely walk to take the shot of a lifetime. Under extreme stress, few dare to coldly wait for the goalkeeper's move. Instead, inexperienced kickers tend to take the simpler penalty: a kick to their "natural side", which for a right-handed kicker means the goalkeeper's right. The historical conversion rate on World Cup penalties is just 70.3 percent, data provider Opta calculates.

The Dutch have designated one of their three goalkeepers as their "penalty killer" but will not reveal who that is. If it's not starting Andries Noppert, coach Louis van Gaal could hire the specialist just before the penalty shootout, as he did with Tim Krul at the 2014 World Cup against Costa Rica. Krul towered over each opposing kicker, insulting

him, and the Dutch won.

That was a case where the aura of a goalkeeper intimidated opponents. One of the beneficiaries of that in Qatar could be Swiss Yann Sommer, who has gone from being an average penalty taker to a penalty taker: since September 2019 he has saved five of the 11 he has faced in all competitions.

England has suffered more penalty sentences than perhaps any other country except Spain. By the time Gareth Southgate became their manager in 2016, they had lost five penalties in a row. Southgate, who missed England's decisive kick in the Euro 1996 semi-final against Germany, has tried to recreate the full shooting environment in training sessions. His men have also been taught a key statistic, writes Paul Hayward in *England Football: The Biography*. "Players who run slowly get a score 80 percent of the time, while those who run faster convert only 60 percent of the time."

Southgate has removed some responsibility from his players by picking England's kickers himself. That banishes the spectacle of a manager begging exhausted and stressed players to try, as Spain coach Fernando Hierro did against Russia in 2018. TV cameras caught striker Diego Costa warning against taking Koke. Hierro insisted: "Koke is good." After the midfielder missed and Russia won, Costa growled, "I told you so."

The choice of management also prevents incompetent penalty takers such as England's Raheem Sterling from self-defeating volunteering. The Southgate team did beat Colombia on penalties in the last World Cup. But the task cannot guarantee success: England lost the Euro 2020 final on penalties, perhaps astounded by the size and shot-stopping brilliance of 6-foot-5 Italian goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma.

Luck matters in firefights. But to paraphrase golfer Arnold Palmer, the more teams prepare, the luckier they tend to get.