

**LEFT
FIELD**



**DATA FOR
RECRUITMENT
DECISIONS**

THE KEYS TO SUCCESS

April 2026

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome to Left Field Football Consulting's review of the use of data in player recruitment decisions.

This report identifies and analyses critical success factors, or 'keys to success', for clubs who seek to use data to outperform their peers in the market for talent.

Left Field's 'State of Play' analysis captured industry trends across data strategy, technology investments, process improvements, and personnel. In this report we focus on the data element.

It is the player recruitment decisions that a club makes – whether or not the decision is to sign that player – that have the greatest sporting and financial implications. Player recruitment is also the use case where we see the greatest advances in the variety and richness of data available to clubs. We expect to see further significant advances over the coming seasons.

As an industry, we have plenty of road left to travel in ensuring that the extent to which data-powered insights are used in decision-making is commensurate with the financial and sporting consequences of the decisions themselves – and nowhere is that truer than in the case of player recruitment.

I hope this report - which has been developed in partnership with Gradient Sports - will stimulate conversation and challenge within your organisation and provide context for broadening and deepening your use of data in player evaluation and recruitment.



Richard Battle,
Founding Director,
Left Field Football Consulting



KEYS TO SUCCESS

This report analyses seven critical success factors in the effective use of data for player recruitment.



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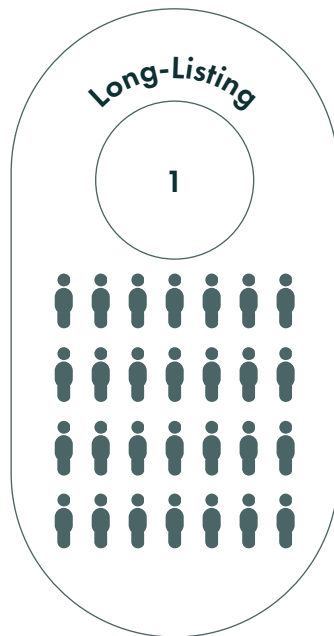
PURPOSE-LED

Each stage of the talent id process can be supported by data, as long as the substance and form of the data is shaped by its function.

Uncertainty in player recruitment is furthered by a lack of consistent alignment, structure, and comparability of data across the talent identification process, which constrains decision-making quality.

GRADIENT FLAG

Gradient analysis, based on their proprietary player grading models, highlights subtle differences between similar profiles. Intuitive outputs improve decision-making at the highest-pressure, highest-cost moments in recruitment.



Large-scale filtering of players based on core criteria such as nationality, age, league, and position.



Narrowing of the player pool via performance metrics, including clubs' own positional profiles.



Detailed evaluation of targets via profiling and analysis, done by experienced staff with deep technical football experience.

COMPLEMENTARY SOURCES

Clubs who invest in and overlay multiple complementary datasets will be the most able to paint the fullest picture of past performance, and make the most reliable predictions about future performance.

Gone are the days when distinct event and tracking (physical output summary) data sets existed in parallel and a club would have one provider for each. Data products are increasingly sophisticated and differentiated, meaning clubs must overlay them to see the fullest picture.

Clubs need to integrate multiple complementary data sources into a single, unified view of performance. This requires the appropriate skill sets, technologies, and clarity of vision to build processes that ingest and combine diverse datasets.

Investment in automation and infrastructure is necessary to ensure that analysis can be scaled effectively as data volume and complexity increase. Without automation, multi-source analysis cannot provide clear, actionable insights at the speed required by decision-makers.

The level of investment by clubs in data, as well as the technologies and skill sets which turn it into insights, should be commensurate with the sporting and financial value of the decisions it informs.





BREADTH OF DATA

The ability to have a base level of data for all players potentially of interest will continue to be essential. What is accepted as the base level will rise with time.

There are cultural, regulatory, operational and commercial barriers to the collection of competition, team and player data. For a player to be identified via a data-led search, a critical mass of data on them must exist.

Clubs require broad and consistent data coverage across relevant competitions and player pools to ensure that players can be identified and evaluated. Broad coverage is increasingly considered a baseline requirement, and expectations will continue to rise over time.

Standardised evaluation frameworks need to be applied to ensure consistency in how players are assessed. Without this, comparisons across teams and competitions become unreliable.

Analysis of performance data must account for differences in league strength, team style, and tactical context. This is essential to ensure meaningful comparison of performance levels.

In addition, clubs need access to cross-league and cross-system comparisons to support robust decision-making when evaluating talent. Clubs remain heavily reliant on commercial data providers to achieve this breadth and consistency of coverage.

RICHNESS OF DATA

The extent to which the full reality of a game can be meaningfully captured by data continues to grow.

A data-led understanding of a player's (or team's) performance in a given match is limited by the technological and resource constraints on data capture and analysis.



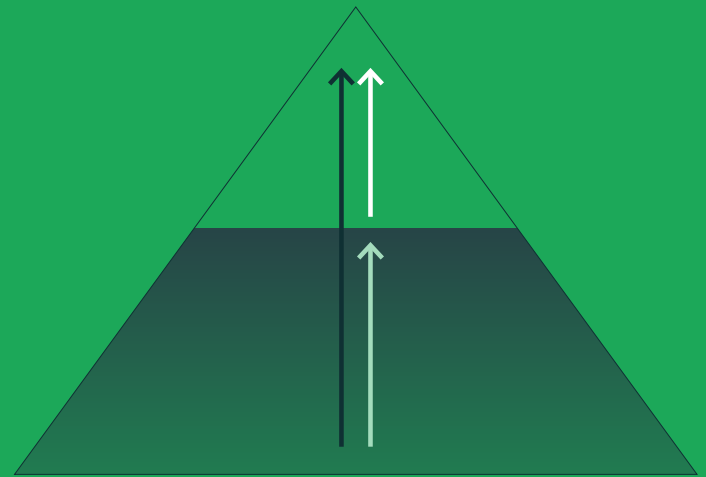
Analysis must go beyond 'traditional' event datasets, incorporating data which captures performance more comprehensively. For example, the quality of execution for individual actions.



Technology will be the catalyst for the launch of new datasets. What is cutting-edge today will be standard tomorrow. Adopting datasets which have enduring value will be key.



The ability to align video and data will limit the risk of misinterpretation. This will apply in a player evaluation context, but also as clubs 'get comfortable' with new-to-market products.



The observable movements and actions of each player, within the context of all other players.

Event data, physical output breakdowns and derived metrics (such as pressures, line breaks and movements).

The elements of the game that we, as an industry, do not yet have the technology, processes, frameworks or language to capture and analyse.

GRADIENT FLAG

Gradient delivers event-level grades which measure quality of execution, as opposed to outcome. The system is designed to distinguish between the signal of player quality, and the noise of the surrounding game, providing a context-rich interpretation of player performance.

BALANCE

Decision-makers must balance data insights with the cumulative knowledge and experience of subject matter experts based on scouting, video-led analysis and market intelligence.

With the limitations of data scouting and the limitations of 'eyes and ears' scouting, there will be occasions when the conclusions of one method do not fully align with those of the other.

For leading clubs, such divergences represent an opportunity to build a fuller picture of reality. In other words, information from data and non-data sources is fully integrated into a single coherent evaluation framework.

A shared language which can be applied to positional player profiles, based on both data analysis and video-led scouting, is invaluable in facilitating the conversations that lead to robust conclusions.

Equally, the use of measured language in communicating data insights is crucial. As is the distinction between factual data and the conclusions which may be inferred from it.

GRADIENT FLAG

Gradient relies upon a dedicated group of highly experienced analysts and coaches who apply their expertise via an objective grading framework. The framework, based on the work of Gradient's sister company, PFF, with 32 NFL teams, is designed to capture structured football-technical expertise at scale.



CONFIDENCE AT SPEED

Unforeseen opportunities will present themselves and require near-immediate responses, meaning clubs must be highly agile without compromising on the robustness of their processes – especially during the latter stages of windows.

The recruitment of a player follows an extended period of scouting, analysis and due diligence. However, potential deals will sometimes arise unexpectedly and merit, at the very least, serious consideration.

The ability to fall back on a pre-agreed framework for player evaluation can help clubs make robust decisions under intense time pressure and, often, public scrutiny.

Player evaluation frameworks and the data which forms part of them can remain consistent, irrespective of the identity of the player. The same is true of the pipelines that deliver the data to decision-makers.

Clubs with solid data infrastructure will be able to surface data at speed.

GRADIENT FLAG

By delivering the outputs of detailed video work, Gradient accelerates processes, enabling robust player analysis in minimal turnaround time. Rigorous quality assurance, ready-to-use metrics and multi-level outputs (API, platform) allow greater certainty, faster.





MODEL GOVERNANCE

For the outputs of a data model to be used in decisions which have significant sporting and financial consequences, the strengths, weaknesses and other characteristics of the model should be understood and monitored.

Clubs must be ready to act decisively in high-stakes situations. Increasingly, they turn to the outputs of data models to guide their actions. However, limited transparency or understanding of how they have been built and how they work may cause their use to be counterproductive.

Over time, trust in data is strengthened through rigorous validation processes, transparent methodologies, and consistent demonstration of value. This trust is further reinforced by user-friendly tools and interfaces - such as visual matrices and AI-powered solutions - that effectively bridge the gap between complex analytical work and practical, day-to-day decisions.

In many industries, the internal processes that govern the build, deployment and ongoing use of models and their outputs are tightly governed. Football must follow suit. To place reliance on a model whose workings and biases are unknown is akin to relying on a scout whose experience and expertise are unproven.



SO WHAT? NOW WHAT?

As data continues to reshape the identification and evaluation of playing talent, we expect to see a number of shifts over coming seasons.

Observations

Implications



Differentiated datasets will continue to become increasingly common, and will be seen as complementary (as opposed to 'either or').

Clubs must integrate multiple data sources into unified, automated workflows and outputs. This robust data engineering must underpin well-designed, decision-ready insights.



As data becomes richer it becomes more suitable for use at the 'end of the funnel', i.e. in detailed player evaluation.

Data-led analysis must separate true performance from noise, and be usable within the same decision process as insights that come from football technical expertise.



Decision cycles can be shaped by external forces, and minimising time-to-insight can create a competitive advantage.

For unforeseen opportunities, analysis is subject to a tension between turnaround time and rigour. If 'off the shelf' insight can be used, the need for compromise is reduced.



When they are used for high-stakes decisions, understanding of the behaviour - as well as the outputs - of models is essential.

Clubs must develop simple but effective frameworks to provide decision makers with clear understanding of model design, strengths, limitations, and blind spots.

ABOUT GRADIENT

Who are Gradient?

Gradient transforms complex data into clear, competitive insights for modern football decision-makers.

Their mission is to lead football analytics, delivering unmatched insights that empower clubs, broadcasters, and fans to make smarter decisions and deepen their connection to the game.

They equip their customers with everything necessary to gain that all-important competitive edge, navigate complexities, seize opportunities, and shape outcomes with confidence. Their analysis transforms data into dynamic insights that reveal what's possible.

Their Player Grades provide a performance rating from 30-100, updated match-by-match, across a growing number of men's and women's competitions. Combined with event and tracking data, every grade reflects the player's execution over the outcome of the event, bringing the full story to life. Player grading is a pioneering way of capturing the layer of quality that traditional analysis has always missed.

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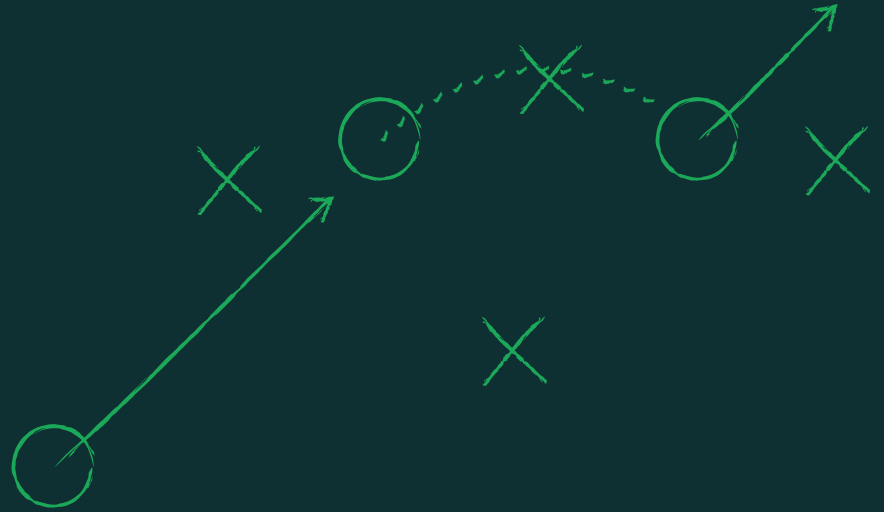
Learn more at gradientsports.com



ABOUT LEFT FIELD

Who are we?

Left Field Football Consulting is a boutique strategy and analytics consultancy, created to improve the availability and quality of information upon which the game's leaders make their most important decisions. We work with investors, leadership teams and performance practitioners across the industry.



Previous Publications

TALENT LANDSCAPE

Premier League 2022/23



THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

The rise of analytics



PLAYER PATHWAYS

Previous playing experiences of loanees.



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