

We propose a new statistic with which to evaluate the defensive performance of fullbacks in soccer. Currently, almost all publicly viewable soccer statistics relate to goal scoring and offensive performance, so we introduce Estimated Goals Saved (EGS), which measures a defender's net effect on the goals conceded by his team.

To calculate this statistic, we would use the player tracking data collected by Opta. Though unavailable publicly, the data does exist privately, so those who have paid Opta to view the data could follow our method and calculate EGS. To do so, first divide the field into square cells. We suggest each cell measure one yard by one yard, though smaller cell sizes would also work. Then, for every instance where a player possesses the ball in the attacking half, note the cell that player was in and tally whether the possession ended in a goal or no goal. For each individual cell, divide the total number of goals scored by the number of possessions in which the ball was possessed in that cell to obtain an expected goal value (xGV) for each cell. Similarly, we can calculate xGVs for direct and indirect free kicks from various spots on the field, as well as penalty kicks.

Once each cell and set piece is given its xGV, we can begin to compute the goals saved by each individual defender. If a defender makes a successful tackle or intercepts a pass, we add to their EGS the xGV of the cell in which they make the tackle or interception. Similarly, if a defender makes a failed tackle and concedes a foul, we subtract from their EGS the difference between the xGV of the cell where the foul was committed and the xGV of a free kick in that same cell.

A failed tackle or interception not resulting in a foul is slightly more difficult to measure. To calculate the EGS from such a play, we propose taking the xGV from the cell where the failed tackle occurred and subtracting the xGV from the cell where the offensive player either releases the ball via a pass or shot, or is approached by another defender within two yards. We then add this total difference to the original defender's EGS. Thus, when comparing defenders using EGS, a mark of zero is average, above zero is good, and below zero is subpar.

EGS will fail to measure a defender's offensive contributions, and thus will underrate a center back like Gerard Pique, who often comes forward on set pieces to score via header goals. Perhaps more criminally, EGS contains several shortcomings regarding the evaluation of a fullback's defensive skill. EGS will not account for a defender's off-ball positioning; if a team is employing the offside trap strategy, a defender out of position 30 yards away from the ball can be the reason a striker springs free to score on a one-on-one. Similarly, defenders who excel at tight man-marking will be undervalued by EGS. Because they are skilled at denying their man any openings to receive the ball, forcing the offense to look elsewhere, they will never have the opportunity to make a tackle or interception.

While EGS is not without its flaws, there is currently no publicly viewable statistic that evaluates soccer players' general defensive performance. Thus, EGS could serve as a base level of evaluation upon which future measures can improve and as the benchmark to which future statistics evaluating defensive performance are compared.