



An Analysis of Passing During the Ulster Senior Football Championship 2010

Abstract

There has been little or no published statistical analysis undertaken with regard to the passing methods in Gaelic football. Tactical evolution has led to much debate among followers of the game surrounding the lessening use of the kick pass and subsequent disappearance of the high catch from the game as well as the increased use of the hand pass. With the hand pass being the shorter passing option in Gaelic football, it may be argued that it is a safer option and therefore a better option for retaining possession. This study will identify the ratio of kick passing and hand passing, as well as success rates of each form of passing throughout the Ulster Senior Football Championship 2010.

A total of 63% of all attempted passes during the 8 USFC 2010 matches were hand passes, while only 37% were kick passes. Of all the hand passes attempted, 94% were successful in retaining possession. By contrast, only 73% of kick passes were successful in possession retention over the course of the championship. On average, there were 12 hand passes and 32 kick passes in every match that resulted in the loss of possession.

The hand pass was predominant in the USFC 2010, with the reason seemingly due to the potential for success with regard to possession retention. The statistics and findings have raised a number of practical questions from a coaching perspective.

Introduction

Sport science has become increasingly evident in a range of sports, none more so than in Gaelic football. Of all the football codes, Gaelic football continues to languish behind with regard to the level and depth of published scientific findings.

Of the limited sport science based publications in Gaelic football, the majority have focused on the physical demands of the game. As far back as 1993, Keane et al. concluded that Gaelic football makes most demands on the aerobic system and that emphasis is on technical aspects of the games skills more than running with the ball. There have been numerous, more recent studies focusing on the fitness requirements, work: rest ratios and movement patterns in Gaelic football.

However, there has been little or no published statistical analysis undertaken with regard to the passing methods in Gaelic football. Teams in American Football, Australian Rules, Rugby Union and League appear to have evolved tactical approaches largely guided by statistics.

In recent years there have been various tactical evolutions in Gaelic football; blanket defence, the sweeper system, 2 man full forward lines, among others. These tactical approaches tend to be interlinked and at times replicated by both teams involved in any match. They have inevitably led to changes in game play patterns, when in possession, in order to counteract the opposition defensive approach.



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Tactical changes have led to much debate among followers of the game. Many 'purists' argue that traditional skills of the game are being lost or compromised by the tactical evolution. The main debate tends to surround the lessening use of the kick pass and subsequent disappearance of the high catch from the game.

There is no shortage of speculation about the factors that are contributing to tactical development. The most common argument being that modern inter-county players have much higher levels of fitness than at any stage in the past and are therefore more capable of attacking as a group which in turn leads to more use of the shorter hand pass. There is a certain element of credibility in this, and indeed further study to assess how physical demands of the game have increased is warranted.

However, there is also the argument that short passing is a safer way of retaining possession. A study by Redwood Brown (2008) focusing in soccer concluded that accurate passing not only retains possession, but may also lead to scoring opportunities while also restricting opposition possessions and scoring opportunities. This conclusion can be applied to all football codes and highlights the importance of possession retention. With the hand pass being the shorter option in Gaelic football, it could be argued that it is a safer option and therefore a better option for retaining possession.

The focus of this study is to assess the passing preferences throughout the 8 matches of the Ulster Senior football Championship 2010. The study would identify the ratio of kick passing and hand passing, as well as the actual success rates of each form of passing.

Methods

- For the purposes of event management, all games in the Ulster Senior football championship in 2010 were recorded to DVD;
- These DVD's were readily available to staff of Ulster GAA;
- Each match was selected in turn and imported to the video analysis software package Dartfish Teampro;
- The software allowed for the creation of a scoring panel for hand passing, and another for kick passing;
- Each panel is subdivided into successful pass and unsuccessful pass;
- The games were watched in real time, and each pass attempted was tagged as appropriate;
- A pass was considered successful if the team in possession retained possession following an attempted pass;
- Likewise, a pass was considered unsuccessful if the team in possession lost possession following an attempted pass.



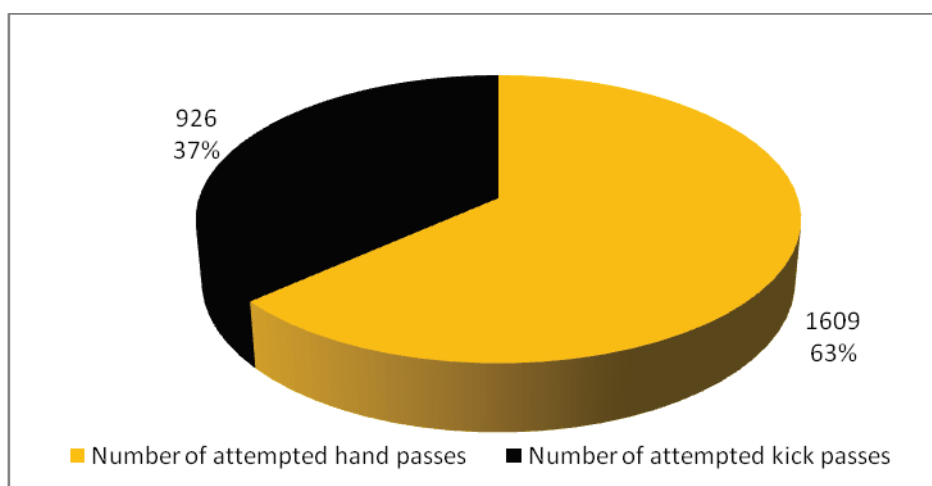
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Results

Hand Passing : Kick Passing Ratio

The ratio of attempted hand passes : attempted kick passes was 2:1. There were twice as many hand passes attempted than kick passes.

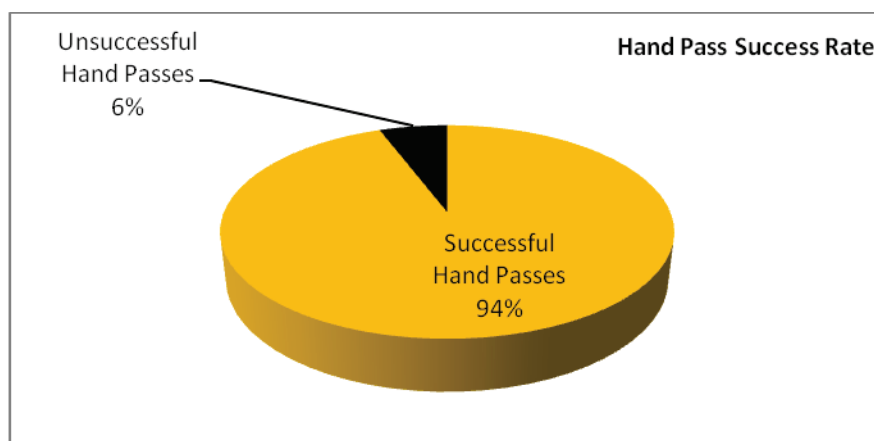
In total, across 8 USFC matches in 2010 there were 1609 attempted hand passes, while there were only 926 attempted kick passes.



Across the 8 USFC matches in 2010, there were 26% more attempted hand passes than kick passes.

Hand Pass

The ratio of successful hand passes to unsuccessful hand passes was 16:1. One from every 17 hand passes attempted resulted in the turnover of possession to the opposition. From the 1609 attempted hand passes, there were 1516 successful hand passes that resulted in possession retention, while there were only 93 unsuccessful hand passes that resulted in the turnover of possession.

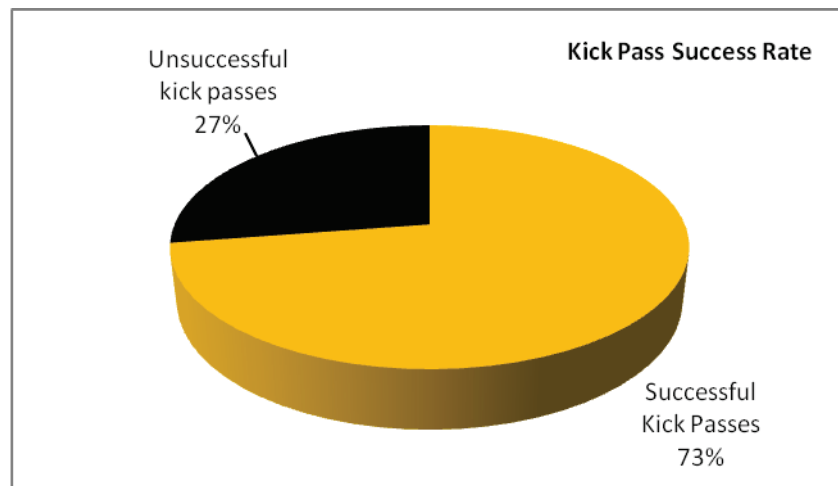




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Kick Pass

The ratio of successful kick passes to unsuccessful kick passes was 3:1. One from every 4 kick passes attempted resulted in the turnover of possession to the opposition. From the 926 attempted kick passes, there were 672 successful hand passes that resulted in possession retention, while there were only 254 unsuccessful hand passes that resulted in the turnover of possession.



The success rate of the attempted hand passes was approximately 94%, while the equivalent for the attempted kick passes was approximately 73%.

Match Averages

There was an average of 317 passes per match attempted in the USFC 2010; 201 hand passes and 116 kick passes.

Of the 201 attempted hand passes per match, 190 will result in possession retention, while only 12 will result in the turnover of possession to the opposition.

In contrast, of the 116 attempted kick passes per match, only 84 will result in possession retention, while 32 will result in the loss of possession.



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Conclusion

The results of this study appear reasonably conclusive. The hand pass was the predominant method of passing the ball in the Ulster Senior Football Championship in 2010. The reason behind this appears to be in the relative success rates measured for each form of passing;

94% of all hand passes resulted in a team retaining possession, while only 73% of kick passes resulted in possession retention.

As stated, the reason for the predominance of the hand pass may be attributed to the higher success rate when compared to the kick pass. The reason for the more favourable success rate of the hand pass may lie in the nature of the pass. The hand pass is generally played over a shorter distance than the kick pass and therefore is less likely to be intercepted or disrupted by an opponent. The kick pass takes a longer time to reach the target, and as such increases the opportunity for an opponent to intercept or disrupt the pass.

These findings may raise a number of questions from the coaching perspective, including the following;

- Is possession retention seen as the key objective for most players when they are in possession?
- Does the need to retain possession inhibit player willingness to take risks?
- Is the creativity of some players being limited by the need to retain possession?
- Are some players lacking in confidence with regard to their ability to accurately kick pass and retain possession?
- Can a coach / team work effectively to improve the success rate of attempted kick passes?

Other questions may be raised through the statistics above; likewise coaches may have alternative views as to the reasons for the predominance of hand passing. The likelihood is that the interpretation and application of these results will vary from coach to coach. These results may be accepted and used to guide the tactical development and training methods to suit success rates of each form of passing. Alternatively, some coaches may choose to use the results as a baseline and set about developing training and tactics that will affect the improvement of the success rates of each form of passing, in particular that of the kick pass.

Ultimately, Gaelic football throughout the USFC 2010 was dominated by the hand pass, which statistically, provided a much safer method by which to transfer possession within a team. Whether coaches choose to develop tactics in accordance with these results and/or set about improving the statistics remains to be seen.



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References

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