

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Five key technical variables in UEFA Cup Finals: Tournament and playing position effects

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Abstract

Aim: This study aimed to comparatively examine the technical performance of players in the finals of three major UEFA club competitions, such as the UEFA Champions League, UEFA Europa League, and UEFA Conference League, with particular emphasis on playing position. **Method:** A total of 62 professional male soccer players who played at least 45 minutes in these finals were included. Players were classified as forwards ($n = 7$), midfielders ($n = 31$), and defenders ($n = 24$) regarding their playing positions. Technical performance was assessed using five key activities: passing, total actions, challenges, tackles, and successful dribbles. The performance data were retrieved via the Sportsbase platform, an international data provider for professional sports competitions. Statistical analyses were conducted using R software, with significance set at $p < 0.05$. Data distribution was assessed using normality tests. The Kruskal–Wallis H test was used to examine differences across tournaments and playing positions. The Benjamini–Hochberg false discovery rate (FDR) correction was applied for multiple comparisons across the five technical variables. Significant findings were examined using Dunn’s post-hoc test with Bonferroni adjustment, and effect sizes were quantified using epsilon-squared (ϵ^2). Tournament $\times$ playing position interactions were examined using aligned rank transform (ART) ANOVA. **Results:** No statistically significant differences were observed among the three tournament finals for any of the five technical variables ($p > 0.05$). In contrast, significant differences were observed by playing position ($p < 0.05$). No significant tournament $\times$ playing position interactions were observed for any technical variable ($p > 0.05$). **Conclusion:** These findings suggest that technical performance in UEFA club competition finals may be more strongly associated with players’ positional roles than with the specific tournament. The findings may provide useful information for coaches and performance practitioners regarding player evaluation, position-specific training design, and technical performance analysis in elite soccer.

Keywords: Game performance, soccer, technical performances, match analysis, UEFA tournaments.

Introduction

Soccer is a multifactorial and complex sport that requires high levels of technical, tactical, and physical qualities (Yi et al., 2019). It is a physically demanding, intermittent team sport characterized by acyclic, highly unpredictable efforts that require repeated high-intensity actions and continuous technical proficiency throughout match play (Aguilar et al., 2012; Dellal et al., 2011). During a 90-min match, players perform more than 1000 activities, including walking, jogging, running, sprinting, jumping, accelerations, and decelerations, while also engaging in physical challenges and technical actions with the ball, such as shooting, dribbling, and tackling (Stølen et al., 2005).

In addition to these variables, another important factor influencing performance in football is the player’s position (Bush et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2020). The position played and physical requirements must be considered carefully, and evaluating the player’s performance to prepare them for future matches is one of the most important issues in recent times (Altmann et al., 2023; Di Salvo et al., 2007). Studies have shown that the physical responses of players (defenders, midfielders, and forwards) on the field during a 90-minute match are not heterogeneous across positions

(Altmann et al., 2023; Yi et al., 2018). Therefore, many studies have shown that even though they are on the same team, players in different positions have different physiological, technical, and physical performance responses. Furthermore, the physical and technical responses of football matches played at different levels also differ.

UEFA’s internationally organized competitions, in which member countries’ club teams participate, consist of the Champions League, Europa League, and Conference League. The Champions League, the most important and prestigious tournament organized by UEFA, is known as the international football tournament where Europe’s strongest clubs compete. Therefore, the performance and technical variables displayed in a UEFA Champions League final match may differ significantly from the characteristics of matches played in other major tournaments or leagues (Kaya & Tarakci, 2026; Liu et al., 2015; Nakayama et al., 2015). The aim of this study is to examine whether the positional and technical responses in matches played in the finals of the three major UEFA tournaments differ between tournaments. There is no previous study in the literature that has evaluated and compared these three major

tournaments in such detail. The hypothesis of this study is that the technical responses obtained in the tournaments differ.

Methods

This study examined the final matches of the UEFA Champions League, Europa League, and Conference League held in 2025. The performance data analyzed in this study were sourced from SportsBase, a professional data provider that offers coaches and researchers access to validated performance statistics across multiple sports, including football. As with comparable platforms in the industry (e.g., OPTA, Instat, Wyscout), SportsBase relies on expert analysts who record and process match events through video analysis, both in real time and retrospectively. Prior research has confirmed the reliability and validity of data supplied by such providers (Liu et al., 2013; Silva & Marcelino, 2022). The variables examined in the study were identified as passing, total actions, challenges, tackles, and successful dribbles. Furthermore, the playing positions of the soccer players were defined as defenders (n = 24), midfielders (n = 31), and forwards (n = 7). The necessary permissions for data use were obtained from SportsBase (27.06.2026).

Participants

This study examined a total of 62 professional male soccer players, defenders (n = 24), midfielders (n = 31), and forwards (n = 7), who played at least 45 minutes in the UEFA Champions League, Europa League, and Conference League final matches held in 2025.

Procedure

During the study, technical performance data for soccer players were collected via Sportsbase (<https://auth.sportsbase.world>), a data provider that offers video-based match-analysis statistics for coaches and researchers. The relevant performance data were retrieved from the platform and transferred into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for further organization and analysis. The dataset was constructed to include the technical performance of players competing in the final matches of three different tournaments, categorized by five distinct performance variables (e.g., passes, total actions, challenges, tackles, and successful dribbles). In addition, players were grouped by playing positions, allowing the effects of both tournament and playing position on technical performance to be examined.

Data Analyses

Statistical analyses were conducted using R software, with significance set at $p < 0.05$. Data distribution was assessed using normality tests. The Kruskal–Wallis H test was used to examine differences across tournaments and playing positions. The Benjamini–Hochberg false discovery rate (FDR) correction was applied for multiple comparisons across the five technical variables. Significant findings were examined using Dunn's post-hoc test with Bonferroni adjustment, and effect sizes were quantified using epsilon-

squared (ϵ^2). Tournament $\times$ playing position interactions were examined using aligned rank transform (ART) ANOVA.

Results

Table 1 shows the distribution of technical variables according to playing positions.

Table 1. The distribution of technical interventions according to playing positions.

Variables	Defence	Midfielder	Forward
Passes	40.73 (31.17–50.97)	31.26 (21.56–40.00)	14.81 (13.26–15.76)
Actions	63.01 (53.29–74.32)	53.48 (43.80–61.85)	41.68 (35.41–42.47)
Challenges	10.41 (6.05–11.73)	11.87 (8.38–14.90)	20.70 (14.81–21.72)
Tackles	1.82 (1.04–3.04)	2.22 (0.97–2.78)	0.00 (0.00–0.47)
Dribbles	0.00	0.95	0.90
Successful	(0.00–0.80)	(0.00–1.38)	(0.45–1.69)

Passes, actions, challenges, tackles, and dribbles successful production are independent of tournament level; finalist teams are at a similar level in these basic technical variables (Table 2).

Table 2. The effects of tournaments on technical variables.

Variables	H	P	P (FDR)	ϵ^2
Passes	0.42	0.812	0.967	≈ 0
Actions	0.07	0.967	0.967	≈ 0
Challenges	8.07	0.018	0.089	0.103
Tackles	0.15	0.927	0.967	≈ 0
Dribbles successful	0.81	0.666	0.967	≈ 0

ϵ^2 : 0.01 small, 0.08 moderate, 0.26 large.

Aside from the "dribbles successful", the effects of positions on technical variables are seen to be moderate (Table 3).

Table 3. The effects of playing position on technical variables.

Variables	H	P (FDR)	ϵ^2
Passes	14.75	0.003	0.216
Actions	11.98	0.005	0.169
Challenges	11.82	0.005	0.166
Tackles	9.56	0.010	0.128
Dribbles successful	6.20	0.045	0.071

ϵ^2 : 0.01 small, 0.08 moderate, 0.26 large.

A comparison of playing positions and technical variables is shown in Table 4. Comparisons involving this group are of low strength due to the small number of forward players (Table 4).

Table 4. Comparison of playing positions and technical variables.

Variables	Defence vs. Midfielder	Defence vs. Forward	Midfielder vs. Forward
Passes	0.107	0.001*	0.039*
Actions	0.272	0.002*	0.051
Challenges	0.468	0.006*	0.077
Tackles	1.000	0.005*	0.002*
Successful Dribbles	0.071	0.228	1.000

* $p < 0.05$

No significant difference was found in the interactions between the tournament and the game positions played (Table 5).

Table 5. Interaction of tournaments and playing positions.

Variables	F	p
Passes	0.36	0.838
Actions	0.41	0.801
Challenges	0.25	0.910
Tackles	0.57	0.689
Successful Dribbles	2.30	0.071

* $p < 0.05$

Discussion

The current study aimed to determine whether players competing in the UEFA Champions League, UEFA Europa League, and UEFA Conference League finals exhibited different technical performances across their playing positions and tournament levels. The main conclusions show that while tournament level was not substantially correlated with passes, actions, tackles, or successful dribbles, playing position was highly correlated with all five technical variables. The only technical factor that had a substantial tournament effect was challenges; however, this effect was not statistically significant. Furthermore, none of the technical performance indicators showed any significant relationships between playing position and tournament. All of these results point to positional role as a more reliable predictor of technical engagement than the respective levels of competition across the three UEFA tournaments.

One of the most important findings was that positional play had a significant impact on all technical variables. Defenders made the most passes and overall actions, while forwards were significantly more involved in tackles and exhibited the lowest frequency of both. Defenders frequently take on responsibility for possession, advancing the ball from defensive zones, and providing passing options; this could explain their higher number of passes and greater technical involvement (Bush et al., 2015; Perrotta et al., 2025). In contrast, forwards play closer to the opponent's goal and are more frequently involved in physical challenges, duels, and attempts to break through the defensive structure; this could explain their higher frequency of tackles (Ermidis et al., 2019; Sarmiento et al., 2024). These results are consistent with the functional demands of different positional roles reported in the literature.

The differences in the number of tackles by position further demonstrate that technical involvement largely depends on the tactical role. Defenders and midfielders made significantly more tackles than forwards, while the difference between defenders and midfielders was not significant. This is logical because defenders are more frequently in positions where their primary responsibilities are to stop opponents' attacks, recover the ball, and prevent progress (Bush et al., 2015; Ermidis et al., 2019; Sarmiento et al., 2024). Therefore, technical performance should be interpreted in relation to the responsibilities undertaken for the position held.

While the overall effect of playing position on successful dribbles was statistically significant, pairwise comparisons did not reveal significant differences across positions. Successful dribbles varies less with playing position than other skills, such as passing, tackling, or interception, and is also influenced by opponent pressure, tactical strategy, match situation, and possession position (González-Rodenas et al., 2020; Sarmiento et al., 2018). While the effects of positional play were evident (Andrzejewski et al., 2022; Di Salvo et al., 2007; Sarmiento et al., 2018), the tournament level had a limited impact on the technical variables examined. Passes, actions, tackles, and successful dribbles did not differ significantly between the three UEFA competitions. Therefore, this finding should be interpreted with caution, as the tendency for variability in tackles may reflect differences in tactical approaches, pressing intensity, defensive organization, or match context rather than the tournament level itself.

Further evidence that the positional pattern of technical performances was generally similar across the three tournaments is the lack of significant tournament $\times$ playing-position interactions for all five technical variables. The competition did not significantly change positional inequalities in challenges and tackles, but defenders continued to participate more in passing and general actions. This conclusion is supported by the impact statistics, which show that while tournament effects were typically insignificant, with the exception of challenges, playing position had moderate effects on the technical factors evaluated. Therefore, these results imply that technical conduct is more strongly and consistently influenced by positional duties than by the particular UEFA tournament.

Nonetheless, the distribution of players across positions should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results. Because there weren't many forwards, comparisons involving this group should be done carefully because lower statistical power might have an impact on the size and stability of positional disparities. The lack of notable pairwise differences for effective dribbling makes this problem more pertinent. Determining whether the observed patterns reflect stable positional features would be more confident with a bigger and more evenly distributed sample across positions.

Conclusion

Overall, playing position was significantly associated with the frequency of fundamental technical variables among players competing in UEFA finals, whereas tournament level was not: positional effects were large and consistent across the Champions League, Europa League, and Conference League, with no significant tournament $\times$ position interactions. This pattern suggests that technical engagement is shaped primarily by positional role rather than by the specific tournament in which a final is played. Accordingly, while playing position should be taken into account when evaluating technical performance, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence that technical performance differs according to the perceived prestige hierarchy of the three competitions (Champions

League, Europa League, Conference League) — a result that may reflect the similarity of competitive demands across their finals.

Authors' Contribution

Study Design: BK; Data Collection: BK; Statistical Analysis: BK; Manuscript Preparation: BK; Funds Collection: BK.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human subjects or interventions. The study was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that there was no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

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