

The Influence of Sliding Tackles on Italian National Team Defense — Game Analysis on Italian National Team in the Second Round of the 2006 FIFA World Cup —

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Soccer is played with the aims of scoring goals while preventing the opponent from scoring goals. Today's soccer exhibits advanced techniques, speedy performances, and quick switches between attack and defense. In order to score goals, players are required not only to formulate systemic defense tactics but also to acquire sliding tackle skills. In the 2006 World Cup, the Italian team conceded only 2 goals throughout the tournament and won the title. These 2 goals resulted from an own goal and a PK, not from their failure in defense. Focusing on their defense capability, this study aimed to clarify the effect of Italy's sliding tackle skills on their defense in the second round through the analysis of their games using the methodology employed by Sekine et al., (2008). The Italian team calmly judged the situation of their opponents and the run of the game and chose suitable areas and timing for attempting sliding tackles, and effective ways to put pressure on the key players of the opposing team. Not individually but as a unified team, they systematically formed a block against their opponents and performed steady risk management by making multiple players move simultaneously for the sake of covering. Immediately after making a sliding tackle, the player would move on to the next performance, which often resulted in making a pass (purposeful sliding tackle). Though sliding tackles are essential for strengthening defense, any failure of sliding tackles in the penalty area, the vital area, can result in allowing the opponent to make a penalty kick/ free kick and can involve a high risk of conceding a goal. It is important to acquire good sliding tackle skills and to carry out purposeful sliding tackles (aimed at making a shot or sending the ball to a dribble/ pass course).

Keywords: Sliding Tackle, Game Analysis, Defense, 2006 FIFA World Cup, Italy National Team, 2nd Round

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1. Aim of the Study

The final game of the 2006 FIFA World Cup (hereinafter referred to as the World Cup) was played by Italy and France, which both had strong defensive capabilities. After playing to a 1-1 draw through two overtime periods, Italy defeated France in a penalty shoot-out to win the World Cup. Throughout the entire World Cup, Italy conceded only 2 goals, one

due to an own goal (by failing to clear a free kick) and the other resulting from a penalty kick (Italian players tangled with an opposing team player when trying to block him from the penalty area). Neither of the two conceded goals was the result of a failure in defense. France allowed 2 goals from the first round to the semi final of the competition, one of which resulted from a PK.

Sekine et al., (2008) clarified the effectiveness

of sliding tackles attempted by the top teams that had won in the first round of the 2006 World Cup. According to their study, the Italian team achieved as high a gross success rate for sliding tackles as 84% in the first game against Ghana, and "positioned a first defender and formed a defense block simultaneously, and took the ball from the USA with few sliding tackles Their success ratio in the critical P area was 100%, which contributed to their preventing the USA from scoring more than one goal." In the game against the Czech Republic, "both teams had a chance to advance to the second round. At 44 minutes into the first half, one of the Czech players was forced to leave the field after making a needless sliding tackle. This put Italy in a numerically advantageous position, and Italy pressed the advantage by forming an effective defense block. Against Czech's shots, Italy defended with sliding tackles in order not to allow Czech the opportunity to make wide-open shots. Italy, a team with extensive experience in match play, played an excellent game with even more tactical skill and finesse than they had exhibited in their previous two games, which was reflected in the gross success ratio for their sliding tackles." Thus, the study carried out by Sekine et al., pointed out the effectiveness of the sliding tackles which Italy attempted in these games.

The excellent defense exhibited by the Italian team, which was traditionally known to have a strong defense capability, in the second round may be analyzed from various perspectives. It seems of significant value to clarify their effective use of sliding tackles in order to develop soccer training for defense technique and strategies.

In this study, the games of the Italian team in the second round of the 2006 World Cup were analyzed utilizing the methodology employed by Sekine et al., (2008).

2. Method of Study

2.1. Subjects and Materials

All 64 games of the 2006 World Cup, which were broadcast by NHK Satellite, were recorded on video. The games played by the Italian team, the winner, in the second round were examined.

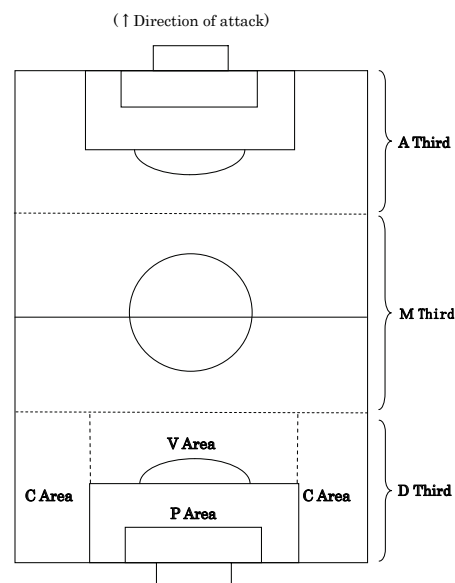


Figure 1 Areas used for analyses

2.2. Analysis Method

Area-based sliding tackles attempted by the Italian team and their opponents were classified by team. The areas of the pitch are as shown in **Figure 1**.

The sideline of the pitch (105 meters long) was evenly divided into thirds; namely, the defending third (D third), the middle third (M third), and the attacking third (A third). The D third was divided into the penalty area (P), the vital area (V), being vital to a successful middle-distance shot or through pass, and the remaining two areas (C) being located respectively between the sideline and the touchline of areas P and V. The frequency and success of the sliding tackles attempted in each of these areas was analyzed (**Table 1-4**).

Sekine, an S-level licentiate officially authorized by the Japan Football Association, judged the success or failure of each of the sliding tackles from a unified viewpoint throughout the games. The judgment standards for sliding tackles and their indication methods were as follows (**Figure 2-11**).

- Success (○)
 - blocking a shot (○S)
 - intercepting a pass (○I)
 - cutting a dribble (○D)
 - limiting the dribble and pass direction (The player who covered took the ball from the opponent.) (○D&C; ○I & C)
 - taking the loose ball from an opponent (○)
 - delaying the attack of the opponent (*)

Table 1 Sliding tackles made in the game played by Italy and Australia (Round 16)

Areas		D Third				M Third	A Third	Total
		P	V	C	Subtotal			
Italy	Number of STs	0	7	5	12	14	1	27
	Number of successful STs		6	3	9	10	1	20
	Success ratio		86%	60%	75%	71%	100%	74%
Australia	Number of STs	4	3	2	9	3	5	17
	Number of successful STs	3	3	2	8	2	3	13
	Success ratio	75%	100%	100%	89%	67%	60%	77%

- leading the opponent to fail in making a shot or pass (○)
- Failure (×)
 - The player attempting to make a sliding tackle was unable to touch the ball at all.
 - An attempted sliding tackle allowed the opponent to have a free kick. (The sliding tackle ended up being judged a foul.)
 - An attempted sliding tackle gave the team no advantage, allowing the opposing team to maintain possession of the ball.
- Not counted (■ • ▲)
 - A pass that was made by a sliding tackle (■)
 - A shot that was made by a sliding tackle (▲)
 (However, if a pass was made through a sliding tackle attempted while scrambling for the ball, the sliding tackle was counted as successful) (□)

3. Results and Speculation

Regarding the games played by the Italian team and their opponents in the second round, the area-based number of sliding tackles, the number of successful sliding tackles, and the success ratios are shown in **Tables 1-4**. For each game, the top cells show the number of sliding tackles attempted by Italy against the opposing team, the middle cells show the number of successful sliding tackles, and the bottom cells show the success ratios for the sliding tackles. The locations of the sliding tackles made by the Italian team and their respective results are shown in **Figures 2-11**. In these figures, a successful sliding tackle is indicated by ○, a failed sliding tackle by ×, and a sliding pass (a pass made through a sliding tackle attempted while scrambling for the ball) by □. The locations of sliding tackles are also shown

in the respective figures together with explanations of the respective situations. (The top of each figure indicates the direction of attack. Sliding shots (▲) and passes (■) are not included in the number of sliding tackles and the success ratios.) Successful sliding tackles are numbered according to their type. Regarding the four games played by the Italian team, the total number of sliding tackles and gross success ratio for each area are shown in **Table 5**.

Game-based analysis results and speculation by the observer are as follows:

3.1. Round 16

$$\text{Italy } 1 \left\{ \begin{array}{l} 0 - 0 \\ 1 - 0 \end{array} \right\} 0 \text{ Australia}$$

3.1.1. Analysis based on areas and success ratios (see Table 1)

The first defender of each team controlled the attack direction of the opposing team and took the ball from the opponent with good positioning and covering. Though the number of sliding tackles was not especially high, Australia actively put pressure on Italy (26 free kicks against Italy) and thoroughly marked Pirlo, who was a pivotal presence for Italy throughout the game, to prevent attacks by Italy. Though playing effectively and producing the opportunity to make shots, Italy was unable to score a goal due to Australia’s aggressive sliding tackles (Their success ratio in the D-third was as high as 89%). Meanwhile, Italy’s first defender intercepted one of Australia’s through passes in the V area and Italy’s second defender aggressively attempted sliding tackles (7 times in the V area; success ratio:

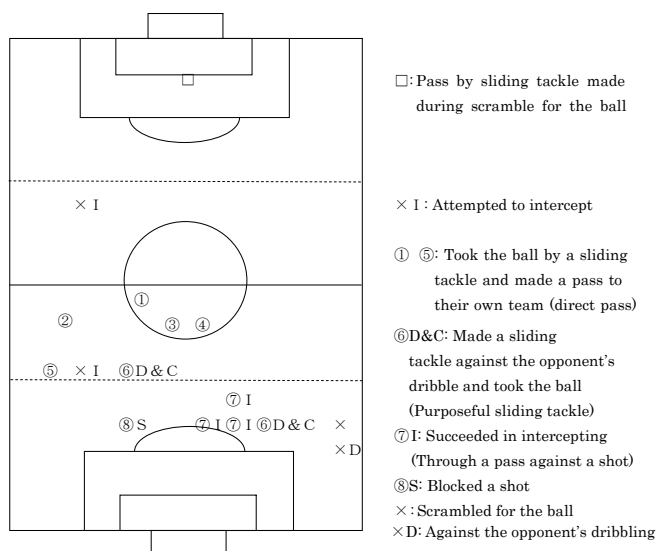


Figure 2 Location of sliding tackles made by Italy (First half of the game against Australia)

86%) in order not to allow Australia to score a goal. Italy also stopped the opponent's dribble by making effective sliding tackles. The goal keeper of each team also performed well at goal-scoring opportunities. In the final 5 minutes of the game, Italy became defensive after one of the players was expelled, and attempted counter-attacks while strengthening their defense. Australia's success ratio for sliding tackles in the D- third was 100% until just prior to the ending of the game, when they failed in sliding tackle just once in the P area, allowed Italy to have a PK, and conceded a goal. This clearly revealed the difficulty in mastering sliding tackle skills.

3.1.2. Analysis based on locations of sliding tackles and their outcomes (see Figure 2 and 3)

Figure 2 (the first half) and **Figure 3** (the second half) show the locations of the sliding tackles attempted by Italy. No Italian player attempted any sliding tackles without the help of other players who moved simultaneously to support the player and to take the ball from the opponent (**Figure 2**: ⑥ D&C; **Figure 3**: ② I&C). Their sliding tackles were directly followed by passing the ball to a player of their own team. This resulted in their swift switch from defense to attack (**Figure 2**: ①-⑤; **Figure 3**: ③). In the V area, they intercepted a powerful through pass (**Figure 2**: ⑦ I) and blocked a shot (**Figure 2**: ⑧ S). In the C area, they prevented themselves from conceding goals by making sliding

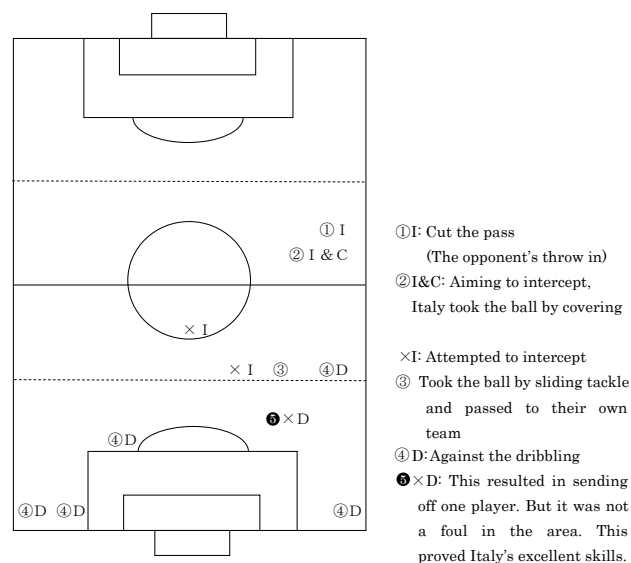


Figure 3 Location of sliding tackles made by Italy (Second half of the game against Australia)

tackles in order not to allow the opponent the chance to intercept a dribble and to launch a cross ball (**Figure 3**: ④ D).

3.2. Round 8

$$\text{Italy } 3 \left\{ \begin{array}{l} 1 - 0 \\ 3 - 0 \end{array} \right\} 0 \text{ Ukraine}$$

Ukraine aggressively prosecuted their attack against Italy from the beginning of the game (31 free kicks against Italy) and attempted as many as 19 sliding tackles in the M-third to take the ball from their opponent. In response, Italy accelerated the switch between attack and defense, took the loose ball by sliding tackles, and attacked effectively. Midfielders and defenders took up good positions to intercept the wedge pass by effective sliding tackles. Though being inferior to the opponent in terms of ball possession ratio, Italy achieved a 100% success ratio for the sliding tackles in the D-third and an 84% gross success ratio. With the excellent defense they mounted, Italy defeated Ukraine with consummate ease.

3.2.1. Analysis based on areas and success ratios (see Table 2)

Ukraine aggressively prosecuted their attack against Italy from the beginning of the game (31 free kicks against Italy) and attempted as many as 19

Table 2 Sliding tackles made in the game played by Italy and Ukraine (Round 8)

Areas		D Third				M Third	A Third	Total
		P	V	C	Subtotal			
Italy	Number of STs	2	0	2	4	11	4	19
	Number of successful STs	2		2	4	9	3	16
	Success ratio	100%		100%	100%	82%	75%	84%
Ukraine	Number of STs	2	6	2	10	19	2	31
	Number of successful STs	1	4	2	7	9	1	17
	Success ratio	50%	67%	100%	70%	47%	20%	55%

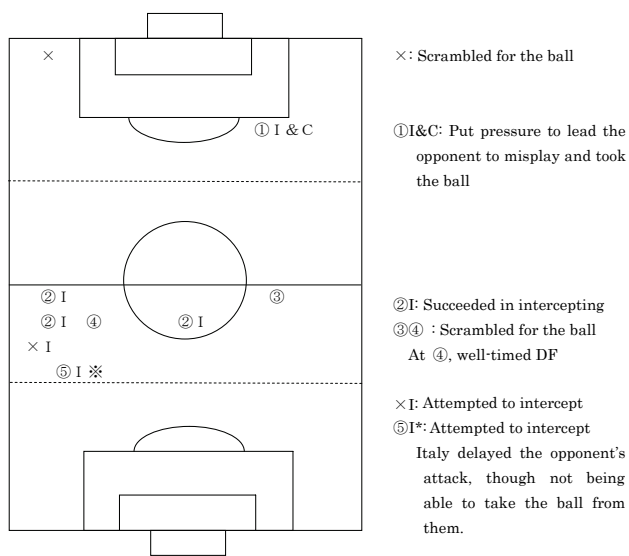


Figure 4 Location of sliding tackles made by Italy (First half of the game against Ukraine)

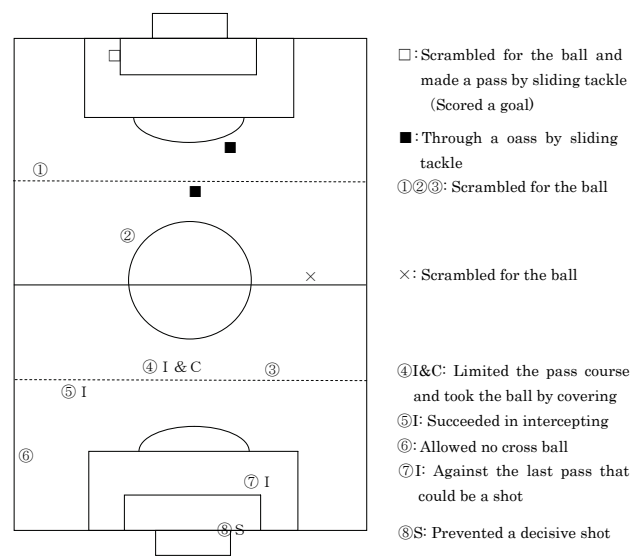


Figure 5 Location of sliding tackles made by Italy (Second half against Ukraine)

sliding tackles in the M-third to take the ball from their opponent. In response, Italy accelerated the switch between attack and defense, took the loose ball by sliding tackles, and attacked effectively. Midfielders and defenders took up good positions to intercept the wedge pass by effective sliding tackles. Though being inferior to the opponent in terms of ball possession ratio, Italy achieved a 100% success ratio for the sliding tackles in the D-third and an 84% gross success ratio. With the excellent defense they mounted, Italy defeated Ukraine with consummate ease.

3.2.2. Analysis based on the locations of sliding tackles and their outcomes (see Figure 4 and 5)

First half (see Figure 4)

In the A-third and the M-third, Italy maintained their control of the game by intercepting the ball

using sliding tackles (2 I), putting pressure on their opponent, which caused them to make mistakes (1 I&C), and by delaying the opponent's attack (5 I*). Italy also took the ball from the opponent by continuing to exert pressure on them (4).

Second half (see Figure 5)

Though Italy succeeded in passing the ball using sliding tackles as they attacked, these tackles are not reflected in their success ratio.

As for the sliding tackles attempted during their defense, Italy limited the pass course from the midfield with their midfielders and defenders taking up positions to intercept the ball using sliding tackles (4 I&C; 5 I; 7 I). Each time their opponent attempted to make a powerful shot, Italy responded with an aggressive sliding tackle (8 S) so as not to concede the goal.

Table 3 Sliding tackles made in the game played by Italy and Germany (Semifinal)

Areas		D Third				M Third	A Third	Total
		P	V	C	Subtotal			
Italy	Number of STs	3	6	7	16	12	0	28
	Number of successful STs	3	5	6	14	6		20
	Success ratio	100%	83%	86%	88%	50%		71%
Germany	Number of STs	5	1	3	9	7	3	19
	Number of successful STs	4	1	2	7	3	0	10
	Success ratio	80%	100%	67%	78%	43%	0%	53%

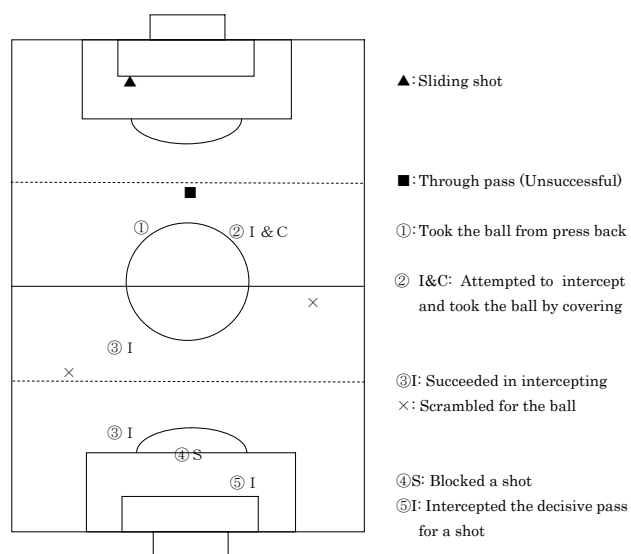


Figure 6 Location of sliding tackles made by Italy (First half against Germany)

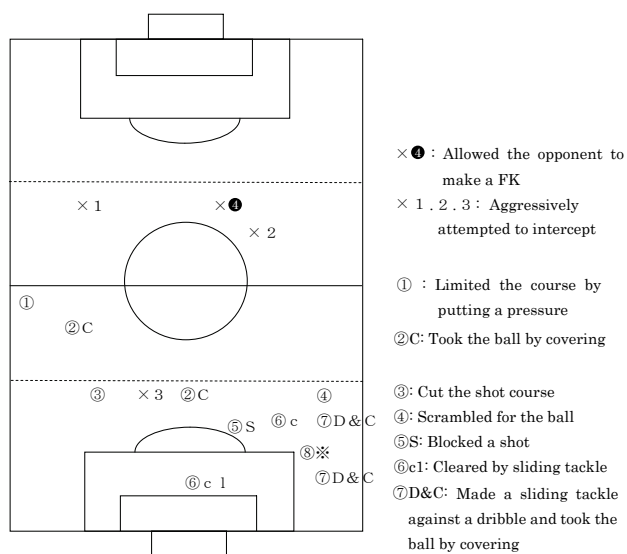


Figure 7 Location of sliding tackles made by Italy (Second half against Germany)

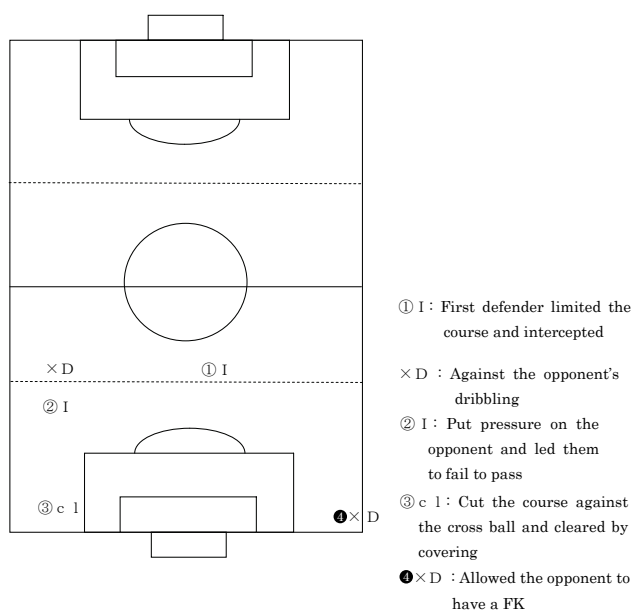


Figure 8 Location of sliding tackles made by Italy (Second half against Germany)

3.3. Semifinal game

$$\begin{array}{l}
 \text{Italy } 0 \left\{ \begin{array}{l} 0 - 0 \\ 0 - 0 \end{array} \right\} 0 \text{ Germany} \\
 \text{Extra time } 2 \left\{ \begin{array}{l} 0 - 0 \\ 2 - 0 \end{array} \right\} 0
 \end{array}$$

3.3.1. Analysis based on area and success ratios (see Table 3)

Both teams exhibited swift switches between attack and defense, and succeeded in putting vigorous pressure on each other from the midfield. Their respective first defenders delayed the attack of their opponent and intercepted the ball to make a counterattack. Italy had the lead in the first half, and Germany took the lead in the second half. The

Table 4 Sliding tackles made in the game played by Italy and France (Final)

Areas		D Third				M Third	A Third	Total
		P	V	C	Subtotal			
Italy	Number of STs	8	11	8	27	18	1	46
	Number of successful STs	8	9	5	22	14	1	37
	Success ratio	100%	82%	63%	81%	78%	100%	80%
France	Number of STs	2	0	1	3	2	1	6
	Number of successful STs	2		1	3	2	1	6
	Success ratio	100%		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

success ratios of the sliding tackles in the D-third of Italy and Germany were, respectively, 88% and 78%, being too high to allow each other to make a shot. Without allowing any goals, both teams went into overtime. During the overtime period, they still maintained their alertness and defended tactically.

In spite of the fact that their success ratio in the P area was as high as 80%, Germany failed to make any sliding tackles (shot block) when Italy made a shot just before the end of the game, and they conceded 2 goals. Meanwhile, Italy had a 100% success ratio for sliding tackles in the P area. The gross success ratios for sliding tackles were 53% for Germany and 71% for Italy.

3.3.2. Analysis based on location of sliding tackles and their outcomes (see Figure 6, 7, and 8)

First half (see **Figure 6**)

Both teams rapidly switched back and forth between attack and defense, putting vigorous pressure on each other (e.g. use of the first defender and press back) to delay each other's attack. Italy intercepted the ball using sliding tackles (②I&C; ③I) and also prevented themselves from conceding a goal by responding with sliding tackles (④S; ⑤I) when the opponent made a decisive shot.

Second half (see **Figure 7**)

In the D-third, Italy put pressure on their opponent even in situations when they were unable to take the ball, attempted aggressive sliding tackles in order to delay their opponent's attack (⑧*), and intercepted the ball (②C; ⑦D&C). As they had done in the first half, Italy prevented themselves from conceding goals through the use of sliding tackles (⑤S; 6cI) when the opponent made a decisive shot.

First and second halves of the overtime period (see

Figure 8)

Even after going into the overtime period, Italy defended tactically and prevented their opponent from scoring any goals. Just before the end of the game, they scored a goal and rode to victory. Throughout the game, Italy clearly demonstrated their aggressive and persevering defense.

3.4. Final game

$$\begin{array}{l}
 \text{Italy} \quad 1 \quad \left\{ \begin{array}{l} 1 - 1 \\ 0 - 0 \end{array} \right\} \quad 1 \text{ France} \\
 \text{Extra time} \quad 0 \quad \left\{ \begin{array}{l} 0 - 0 \\ 2 - 0 \end{array} \right\} \quad 0 \\
 \text{PK} \quad 5 - 3
 \end{array}$$

3.4.1. Analysis based on area and success ratios (see Table 4)

France dominated this game and attacked Italy from the midfield to the V area with dribbles and through passes. Italy exerted pressure on France and defended by enclosing France while the team's players in the back made sliding tackles and took the ball from France. At France's goal-scoring opportunities, Italy made aggressive sliding tackles (success ratio in the P area: 100%) and prevented themselves from conceding goals. In the second half, Italy's sliding tackles in the P area, V area, and the right C area increased in number with an 81% success ratio (for including of the first and second halves of the overtime period the first half and second half). France was not allowed to score any goals. Individual players of the French team were quick to anticipate and judge and were excellent in terms of

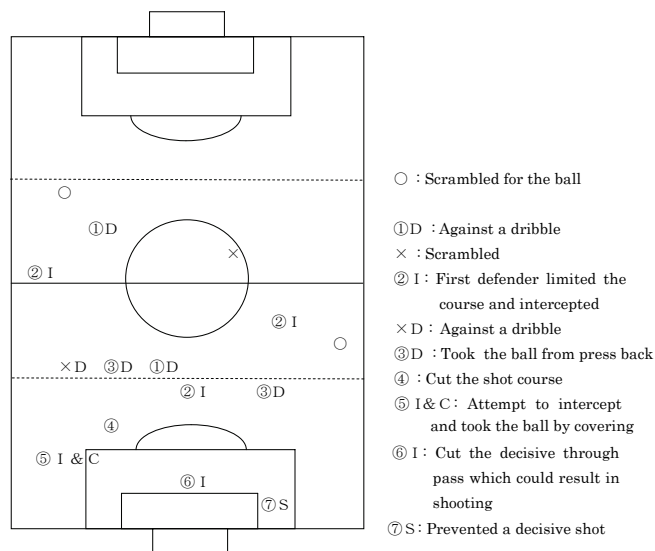


Figure 9 Location of sliding tackles made by Italy (First half against France)

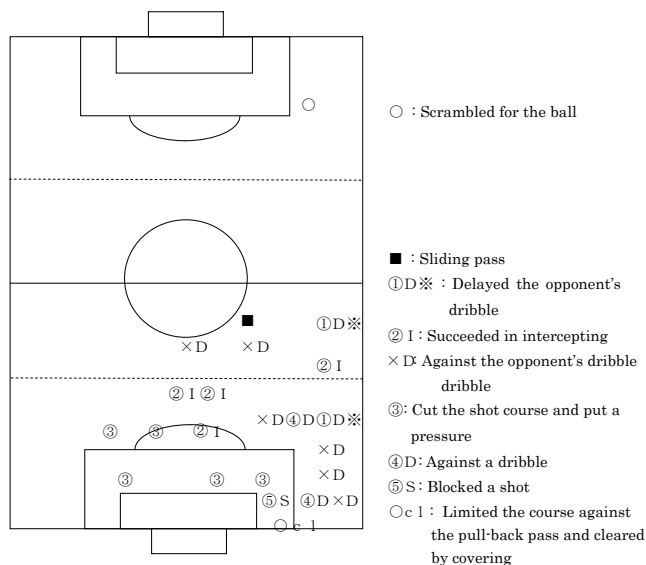


Figure 10 Location of sliding tackles made by Italy (Second half against France)

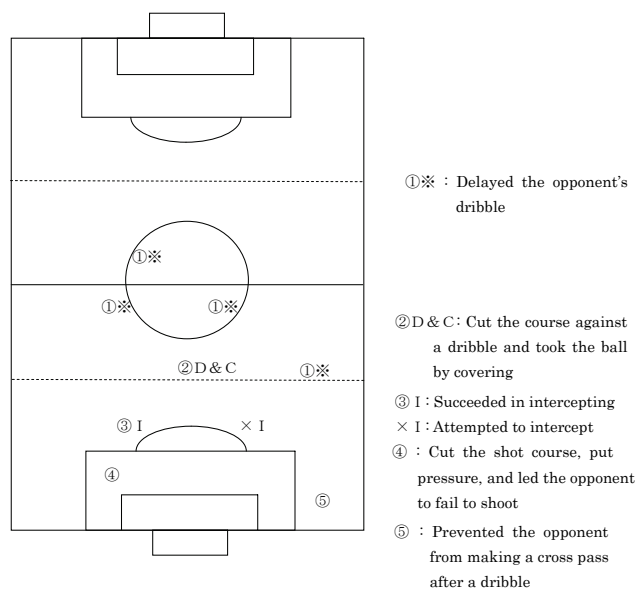


Figure 11 Location of sliding tackles made by Italy (First and second halves of overtime game against France)

positioning. They defended tactically against Italy and played together as a team to block Italy's attack by skillful covering and with a minimum number of sliding tackles.

During the overtime, both teams continued to play a seesaw match without scoring any goals even after Zidane of France was sent off. Italy finally won in a penalty shoot-out. Italy made 46 sliding tackles during the game with their gross success ratio being as high as 80%.

Similarly to Italy, France was also excellent in defense, and their gross success ratio of sliding

tackles was 100%. The only goal they conceded was due to a CK. From the first round to the semifinal game, they allowed only 2 goals, including the one that resulted from a PK. This proved their high ability for defense. This final game had much to offer to viewers in terms of defense skills.

3.4.2. Analysis based on the location of sliding tackles and their outcomes (see Figure 9, 10, and 11)

First half (see Figure 9)

Maintaining balanced positioning, Italy played team defense by filling in the space and cutting the dribbles (③ D). Against the opponent's through passes, the first defender limited the pass course and the second defender attempted to intercept the passes (② I) or took the ball by covering it after making sliding tackles (⑤ I & C). Italy prevented themselves from conceding goals by cutting decisive through passes (⑥ I) or blocking decisive shots (⑦ S). Their success ratio for sliding tackles in the D-third was 100%. They allowed a goal through an unlucky PK, but then scored a goal by heading after a CK and leveled the score.

Second half (see Figure 10)

Though both teams took quick approaches in the first half, they slowed down in the second half in defending against each other's dribbles. Italy exerted pressure using a sliding tackle to delay the opponent's attack with a dribble (① D*) and intercepted a pass because of good positioning (② I) to take the ball from their opponent. They also blocked the

Table 5 Sliding tackles made by Italy in the 4 games of the second round (Area-based total numbers and success ratios)

Areas	D Third				M Third	A Third	Total
	P	V	C	Subtotal			
Total number of STs	13	24	22	59	55	6	120
Total number of successful STs	13	20	16	49	39	5	93
Gross success ratio	100%	83%	73%	83%	71%	83%	78%

opponent's shoots using sliding tackles (⑤ S) and cut the shot course to cause their opponent to misplay and prevent themselves from conceding goals.

First and second halves of the overtime (see **Figure 11**)

In the first half of the overtime, France dominated the game. Though being unable to take the ball from them, Italy exerted pressure on their opponent to delay their attack and made sliding tackles to delay their dribble to the goal (① *). Covering from a good position, Italy took the ball from France at the end and made an attack (② D & C). In the C area, Italy made aggressive sliding tackles to stop France's cross ball (⑤) and succeeded in denying their opponent the opportunity to score goals.

4. Conclusion

During the second round, Italy made 27 sliding tackles in Round 16, 19 in Round 8, 28 in the semifinals, and 46, the largest number ever, in the final game, including the overtime period. The gross success ratios for sliding tackles were: 74% in Round 16 against Australia, 84% in Round 8 against Ukraine, 71% in the semifinals against Germany, and 80% in the final game against France. The average of the gross success ratios was 78%. In the final game, Italy made as many as 46 sliding tackles, whose success ratio was as high as 80%. They conceded a goal only through a PK. This suggests that these sliding tackles had a significant effect on their defense.

Regarding the games following Round 16, the numbers of the sliding tackles the Italy made in the respective areas in the respective games against Australia, Ukraine, Germany, and France were: in the P area, 0 (vs. Australia), 2 (vs. Ukraine), 3 (vs. Germany), and 8 (vs. France); in the V area, listed in the same order as above, 7, 0, 6, and 11, and in the C

area, 5, 2, 7, and 8. The total number of the sliding tackles made in the D-third was 59, which was larger than the number made in the M-third; that is, 55. The success ratio for the D-third was 83%, which was higher than that for the M-third; that is, 71%. The success ratio for the P area was 100%, proving that Italy unfailingly intercepted their opponents' shots. The success ratios for the V area and the C area, where there was a high risk of conceding goals, were, respectively, 83% and 73% (**Table 5**).

These results illustrate that the success ratios of Italy's sliding tackles were high in the P area, which was the most risky area, the V area, and the C area, in this order, and that Italy was excellent in their sliding tackle skills as well as their risk management. They calmly judged the situation of their opponent and the run of the game and chose suitable areas and timing for attempting sliding tackles, and effective ways to put pressure on the key players of the opposing team over the course of each game. Not individually but as a unified team, they systematically formed a block against their opponent and performed steady risk management by making multiple players move simultaneously for the sake of covering. Immediately after making a sliding tackle, the player would move on to the next performance, which often resulted in making a pass (purposeful sliding tackle).

In terms of soccer, the speed of judgment and play are expected to become increasingly higher. Any failure of sliding tackles in the penalty area, the vital area, can result in allowing the opponent to make a penalty kick/ free kick and can involve a high risk of conceding a goal. It is important to acquire good sliding tackle skills and to carry out purposeful sliding tackles (aimed at making a shot or sending the ball to a dribble/ pass course). It is necessary to assess the situation of one's team and that of the opponent's team quickly to take up appropriate positions or to delay the opponent's attack before

they are able to prepare for a systemic defense. It is only through these attempts that soccer players are able to present an aggressive and steady defense, prevent themselves from conceding goals, and lead themselves to victory.

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