It is generally accepted that games played away from home are more difficult to win than those played in front of your own crowd. This phenomenon, known as ‘home advantage’, has received plenty of attention from supporters and media alike. But how does home advantage influence a coach’s approach? New research from a team of academics in Germany used an online football management game to find out.
Introduction - what is home advantage?

Home advantage refers to the fact that matches played at home are won more often than matches played away. Research has shown this is the case in all team sports, countries and eras. However, the level of home advantage varies depending on changes in these specific factors.

In football, in both the 2014–2015 English Premier League and Women’s Super League competitions, 45% of matches were home wins, compared to 30% of away wins in the men’s competition and 37% in the women’s. Football is the world’s most popular sport, as well as being the sport in which home advantage is most apparent. Supporters and the media have long discussed home advantage. However, discussions on its causes are often a matter of personal opinion or are based on reconsidering archived information — in other words, looking back at what happened after the event.

As most academic research into home advantage in sports has also viewed the topic from this angle, a team of researchers from Germany aimed to broaden existing knowledge by taking a different approach — devising an experiment that identified how coaches’ psychological and tactical approaches differ depending on where a match takes place.
The project responded to a call from academics for more experimental research into the causes of home advantage. The researchers in Germany noted that while previous studies helped identify some of the key factors associated with home advantage (e.g., crowd, distance travelled to venue, decisions made by officials), they never clarified what the underlying causes actually were.

An area where a real shortage was identified was research on the psychological states of the individuals involved, particularly coaches and their coaching approach for home and away games.

Therefore, the project aimed to fill this gap by focusing on coaches and three aspects of their approach – their expectations and goal setting, their tactical decisions, and their level of expertise.

The idea was to conduct an experiment to test whether expectations, goal setting, and tactics were affected by the location of a match, as well as whether there was a difference in approach based on coaches’ level of expertise.

Having reviewed existing research, the team hypothesised that coaches preparing for home games would have higher expectations, set higher goals, and implement more attacking playing tactics than if they were preparing for an away game.

But how accurate was this hypothesis, and how did they test it? By asking coaches to play an online management simulation that required them to make decisions at specific points in a fictional football game.
The team enlisted the help of 297 German football coaches, split into two groups of high (35%) and low expertise (65%).

High expertise coaches had at least 15 years’ experience, worked in one of the top German leagues (Bundesliga or upper regional leagues of men, women or youth football) or held what was defined as a high level coaching qualification (UK Level 3 equivalent or above).

Low expertise coaches had less than 15 years’ experience and only coached in lower regional and minor leagues (again with male, female and youth teams). They also held lower level coaching qualifications (defined as UK Level 2 equivalent or below).

The experiment was based on an online management game that required coaches to make decisions at multiple points during a match. The coaches were randomly split into two groups – one group coached the home team and one coached the away team. This was the only differing information they received throughout the experiment.

The coaches did not know they were taking part in an experiment to determine the difference between home and away games, only that they were helping to investigate football coaches’ tactical decisions.

Both groups were told their team was in the middle of the league table, on the same number of points as the other team and having previously played out a 1–1 draw in their first league meeting.

Coaches were then asked to make decisions at four points of the game:

- Beforehand, regarding their expectations and tactical approach, including playing system (formation) and how the team should play.
- At half-time. After being told the scoreline was 0–0, coaches’ goal setting for the remainder of the game was assessed, and they were given the opportunity to change the tactical approach.
- After 70 minutes. Again, after being told the scoreline was still 0–0, coaches were asked to make one substitution.
- At the end of the game. After being told the final score was 0–0, coaches’ goal setting was assessed again.
Does playing at home make a difference?

The short answer is yes. The experiment showed that regardless of the level of expertise, the coaches in the home game group had higher expectations prior to the game.

Their internal expectations — their belief that the team had the skills and capability to be successful — were higher; and so were their external expectations — their belief that the conditions of the game, being at home, in front of their own crowd in familiar circumstances (ie stadium) provided them with an advantage.

Their higher expectations were also evident in their tactical approach. Home game coaches chose more dominant, attacking playing styles and courageous tactics both before the game and at half-time compared to the approach employed by coaches in the away group. For example, they were more likely to encourage players to take risks, press high up the field, and play a high defensive line.

The home game coaches also made a more attacking substitution in the 70th minute and opted for more attacking full-backs throughout the game. Interestingly, the higher expertise coaches were more likely to employ this tactic with full-backs, which was the only real difference identified between coaches with differing expertise in the home and away groups.

In terms of goal setting, unsurprisingly given the results above, the home game coaches were less satisfied with the 0–0 scoreline at half-time than those in the away group. This led to them choosing more attacking tactics at half-time, as detailed above. And, when the game ended 0–0, the home game coaches were even less satisfied than they were when the scoreline was the same at half-time.
The research provides a number of interesting learning points for coaches to consider. Although firmly grounded in football, home advantage has been identified in all team sports, therefore the following ideas should not be seen as relevant for football coaches only.

While we might have expected the academics’ hypothesis to be proved correct, the research provides some practical learning points for coaches to consider when preparing for both home and away games.

• While this research was based on an experiment and not the coaches’ actual teams, it is interesting that the game location still had an impact on their coaching approach. As a coach, it could be valuable to spend some time reflecting on how you change your own approach based on the location of a game, and how opposing coaches may also change their approach for the same reason.

• When reflecting on your approach, remember that higher expectations (of your players’ ability and of the external factors involved) are likely to lead to more ambitious goals and more attacking tactics. While a more attacking approach can increase the likelihood of winning, particularly when combined with a more defensive approach from the opposition, you could also use this knowledge to try to gain an advantage.

• For example, if playing a match away from home, it could be worth trying a more attacking tactical approach and setting more ambitious goals, bearing in mind that the opposing coach is likely to expect a less attacking approach given you are the away team.

• It may also help to remember that game location also has an impact on players. When playing at home, players are likely to have higher expectations of themselves and of the impact of external factors (ie crowd, venue familiarity etc) than when playing away.

• You may be able to act on this when preparing for a match. For example, could you use this knowledge in team talks to encourage players before a home game and build their confidence further?

• And on the flipside, when preparing for an away game, could you explain to your players that many of the things the home team thinks are an advantage for them are actually the same for both sides (eg the dimensions of the pitch and the fact that the crowd can affect the atmosphere but not the action that takes place in the game itself)?
If you are interested in reading more about home advantage and coaching, this summary is based on the research article below:


Other academic articles covering this subject are also available:


