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Decision-Making Efficiency in Elite Wingers: A Case Study of Lamine Yamal

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Abstract: *This study investigates the mechanisms behind factors that influence dribbling efficiency at the highest level of soccer through a case study of Lamine Yamal. The study combines statistical analysis and comparative analysis to examine how contextual decision-making influences dribbling outcomes in high-frequency one-on-one situations. Performance trends are compared with Nico Williams of Athletic Club as a reference player due to similar positional roles and league environments. The analysis incorporates both statistical data and qualitative match footage to evaluate factors such as body orientation, timing of engagement, and spatial positioning during dribble attempts. The results indicate that Yamal maintains high dribbling success rates while sustaining relatively controlled possession losses despite high usage. The study suggests that elite dribbling efficiency is not primarily driven by exceptional physical attributes but rather by cognitive factors related to decision-making, spatial awareness, timing, and composure.*

Keywords: *Soccer analytics, Dribbling efficiency, Decision-making in soccer, Spatial awareness in sports, Player performance analysis, Case study*

1. Introduction

In the highest level of modern professional soccer, what determines the difference in dribbling efficiency among wingers? Although dribbling ability is a central weapon for modern wide players, systematic analysis of its underlying efficiency mechanisms remains limited. In particular, little attention has been given to how players sustain efficiency under high usage without suffering from increased turnovers or diminishing returns. This study seeks to address that gap through the case of Lamine Yamal. By combining quantitative performance data with contextual match analysis, this paper aims to explain how Yamal maintains stable dribbling efficiency despite a consistently high volume of attempts [1]. This study proposes that elite dribbling efficiency functions primarily as a cognitive skill centered on decision-making rather than as a purely explosive physical attribute. At the elite stage, one-on-ones are no longer merely contests of pure speed and strength. They involve perception, timing, manipulation, and anticipation. Lamine Yamal represents a new generation of wingers whose productivity increasingly reflects structured decision-making rather than raw athletic dominance.

2. Materials and Methods

This study implements a combined research approach of case statistic analysis and comparative analysis to examine the factors that contribute to differences in dribbling efficiency among elite wingers participating in professional soccer leagues. The primary focus of this study is to explore how players' tactical and perceptual qualities relate to stability of their dribbling under frequent usage one-on-one situations.

2.1 Sources and Statistical Standards

Data and Statistics used in this research are obtained from publicly accessible platforms including FotMob, StatsMuse, and FBref (FBref, 2026; FotMob, 2026; StatsMuse, 2026). Due to variations in how platforms define and record metrics such as successful dribbles and attempted dribbles, this study focuses on the structural consistency of trends rather than relying on absolute values from separate individual sources.

To reduce fluctuation of trends resulting from differences in playing time, the selection of comparative subjects is carefully considered, and all key performance benchmarks are based on

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standardized games per 90 minutes.

2.2 Statistic Classification and Analysis Framework

This study does not view dribbling efficiency as a single outcome variable, but rather divides it into two layers: Outcome data : Successful dribbles Dribble success rate Ball possession losses. Contextual data : Spatial location of the dribble Defensive pressure at attempted dribbles.

By integrating both outcome data and contextual process factors, this framework aims to evaluate how decision-making (awareness of contextual data) can enable individual players to sustain dribbling efficiency under high usage conditions and to better understand the mechanisms behind those who possess performance stability [2].

2.3 Selection of Comparative Subjects

The FC Barcelona right-winger Lamine Yamal is the primary case subject in this study. Nico Williams from Athletic Club is selected as a comparative reference. Case studies refer to the 2024/25 and 2025/26 seasons.

Both players are La Liga wingers responsible for frequent one-on-one attacking duties and have served as starting wing players for the Spanish national team. Since they compete in the same league environment and under similar competitive intensity, they provide a meaningful comparison.

2.4 Qualitative Analysis

In addition to statistical analysis, this study incorporates match footage to examine Yamal's receiving habits, body orientation, timing of acceleration, and execution of technical movements during successful dribble situations. Observations are based on recurring patterns across multiple matches rather than isolated highlight moments.

3. Results

3.1 Stats Background and Consistency

There exists statistical discrepancies between platforms regarding "successful dribbles," as summarized in Table 1 For example, FotMob records Yamal with 161 successful dribbles in the 2024/25 season of Laliga; while StatsMuse logged 145 successful dribbles (FotMob, 2026; StatsMuse, 2026) [3][4]. On the other hand, Sofascore reports 285 successful dribbles in the 2025 calendar year (Sofascore, 2026) [5]. Despite numerical differences, all platforms consistently indicate exceptionally high volume and stable efficiency.

Table 1 Comparative Dribbling Performance Metrics of Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams across Seasons

Player	Successful Dribbles	Dribble Success Rate	Source	Time-span Seasons
Lamine Yamal	71	N/A	StatsMuse	2025/26 First 14 League Rounds
Nico Williams	37	N/A	StatsMuse	2025/26 First 14 League Rounds
Lamine Yamal	161	55.7%	FotMob	2024/25 Season
Lamine Yamal	145	N/A	StatsMuse	2024/25 Season
Nico Williams	68	39.5%	FotMob	2024/25 Season
Nico Williams	68	N/A	StatsMuse	2024/25 Season
Lamine Yamal	285	N/A	Sofascore	2025 Year
Nico Williams	47	43.1%	FotMob	By Round 23 25/26
Lamine Yamal	100	54.7%	FotMob	By Round 23 25/26

3.2 Current Season Advantage

Even under conservative estimates, Table 1 shows that Yamal significantly exceeds Nico Williams in successful dribble count. While maintaining higher successful dribble counts than Williams (100 and 47), Yamal also holds a higher success rate near 55%, compared to Williams' approximately 43% (FotMob, 2026) [3]. Notably, in early February 2026, Lamine Yamal became the first player in Europe's top five leagues to surpass 100 successful dribbles for the season (FotMob, 2026) [3]. This milestone reinforces both volume dominance and sustained efficiency.

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3.3 Not a One Season Wonder

During the 2024/25 La Liga season, as reflected in Table 1, Yamal recorded 161 successful dribbles at a 55.7% success rate, ranking first in the league (FotMob, 2026) [3]. Nico Williams recorded 68 at 39.5% (FotMob, 2026) [3]. Additionally, Yamal's 285 successful dribbles in the 2025 calendar year represent the highest total among top-five league players and the most by a Barcelona player in a single year since Lionel Messi in 2015 (Sofascore, 2026) [5]. Stats across 2024/25 and the current season suggests that Yamal's production reflects consistency rather than short-term spikes.

4. Discussion

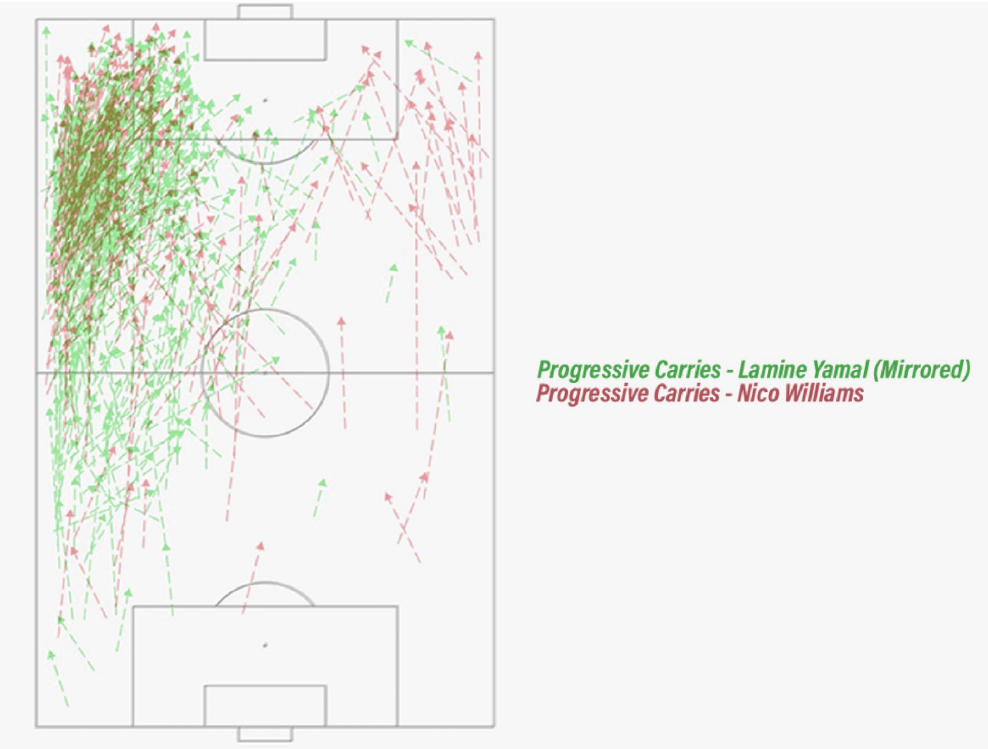

Fig. 1 Spatial Distribution and Dribble Initiation Zones of Lamine Yamal

The foundation of Yamal's dribbling efficiency does not primarily lie in explosive acceleration or high-frequency touches [6]. Instead, it is rooted in the spatial location of his dribble attempts and the context in which he receives the ball. The base of Lamine Yamal's dribbling efficiency does not primarily depend on explosive acceleration, top speed or frequent touches. Instead, it is rooted in his contextual awareness of when and how to execute to beat defenders. Based on positional heat map analysis, as illustrated in Fig. 1, Yamal's progressive carries on the ball are concentrated along the wing-line in the attacking third and the right half-space near the edge of the penalty area. Meanwhile, his overall touch distribution extends across the wide channel and into interior midfield zones. This suggests that his dribble attempts are structurally positioned in high-impact attacking areas rather than in low-value or high-risk buildup zones.

From a statistical perspective, during the first half of the 2025/26 season, Yamal ranked first in La Liga in successful dribbles per 90 minutes. However, he did not rank among the top ten wingers in possession losses per 90. This combination — high dribble frequency with controlled turnover levels — is uncommon among high-usage wide attackers. Match footage further indicates that many of Yamal's dribbles begin when he receives the ball already facing the defensive line, rather than with his back to goal under immediate pressure. This body orientation expands his decision-making window and reduces the likelihood of immediate dispossession.

Additionally, Lamine Yamal does not rely on static wide positioning to generate isolation. Instead, he frequently alternates between touchline and channels, forcing defenders to choose between protecting the interior channel or closing down the box. When defensive pressure is not fully established, he often initiates subtle inward touches or deceptive passing feints to trigger defensive

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reactions before committing to a final direction. In back-facing-goal situations, Yamal typically prioritizes resetting his orientation and space between defenders through small backward touches rather than engaging directly in physical duels. This preserves the choice to either continue the dribble or recycle possession depending on the defensive response.

Taken together, Yamal's dribbling efficiency is not the product of a single technical strength. It emerges from flexible positioning, receiving orientation, and timing of engagement. His dribbles are structurally initiated in situations that increase probability of success.

To further investigate whether dribbling efficiency is mainly a result of decision-making rather than physicality, Nico Williams, a Spanish winger from Athletic Club, is selected as a comparative reference. Both players are La Liga wingers with high attacking responsibility, and both compete in the same tactical and physical environment. Their positional heat maps indicate similar activity zones in the attacking third, suggesting that structural differences in positioning alone cannot fully explain the efficiency gap.

4.1 Difference in Usage and Efficiency

During the 2024/25 La Liga season, Yamal recorded 161 successful dribbles at a 55.7% success rate. Nico Williams recorded 68 successful dribbles at a 39.5% success rate. In the opening 14 rounds of the 2025/26 season, Yamal recorded 71 successful dribbles compared to Williams' 37. By Round 23, Yamal surpassed 100 successful dribbles at a 54.7% success rate, while Williams stood at 47 with a 43.1% rate. The trend is clear for Yamal : Higher usage does not lead to declining efficiency.

4.2 Efficiency Across Multiple Seasons

Dribbler wingers often experience adaptation effects from defending teams in following seasons, leading to efficiency decline. Opponents redirect scouting focus and defensive plans to deal with threats from the wingers. However, across both 2024/25 and 2025/26, Yamal's success rate has remained consistently near 55% while his total dribble volume has increased. This shows no marginal efficiency decrease despite the more frequent attempts to dribble. In contrast, Nico Williams' success rate has remained around 40–43% across seasons. This leads to the idea: performance difference under a similar environment is closely associated with decision-making structure rather than raw physical traits.

4.3 Cause of Differences

Although both players operate in similar wide attacking zones, video analysis reveals a meaningful difference in when and how dribbles are initiated. Yamal's dribbles frequently occur when defensive structures are not fully organized, either during transitional phases or when coverage is incomplete, creating one-on-ones. He often begins actions with a wide and open body positioning, gaining visual access to the whole defensive line. When such conditions are not met, the chances of Yamal committing a dribble is low, which he would instead seek alternative approaches. In comparison, Williams frequently initiates dribbles against already established defensive blocks, relying more heavily on beating opponents by their own momentum, and explosive acceleration. This difference is not a reflection of incompetence. Rather, it highlights a difference in situational filtering and their true role on when to attack versus when to reset. In similar spaces, Lamine Yamal reduces risky attempts through selection. His understanding of the game and his role in the team enables him to recognize windows before defensive structures are stabilized, and when to pass back. Former FC Barcelona manager Xavi Hernández summarized this quality: "Like I said, he nearly always makes the right decision, which is important, picking the best option." (Marsden & Llorens, 2023) [7]. This qualitative assessment aligns closely with the quantitative patterns observed in this study.

4.4 Technical Execution

Unlike wingers who rely on repeated stepovers to find space, or pure acceleration bursts, Yamal typically uses a number of deliberate feints followed by a single committed acceleration. His approach reduces unnecessary touch and minimizes ball exposure time. According to data from FBref, across the 2024/25 and 2025/26 season, Yamal's successful dribbles per 90 minutes significantly exceeded average wingers of his position, while his touches per 90 and progressive carry distance do not scale proportionally to his dribbles (FBref, 2026) [8].This suggests that his quantity of dribbles is not driven

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by volume but by timing. His technical profile reflects a rhythm-oriented dribbler. Rather than overwhelming defenders through raw speed or fast feet, he manipulates defensive reaction timing. By adjusting feints and speed, he delays defensive commitment and creates space for him to exploit. The critical factor is not technical complexity but control and anticipation with deliberate techniques. Through structured manipulation, Yamal sustains ball security while generating high-value attacking actions. This execution pattern further supports the study's central claim: efficiency advantage originates from decision logic rather than pure physical dominance.

Fig. 2 highlights Yamal's spatial manipulation and ability to create attacking advantages within minimal time and confined space.

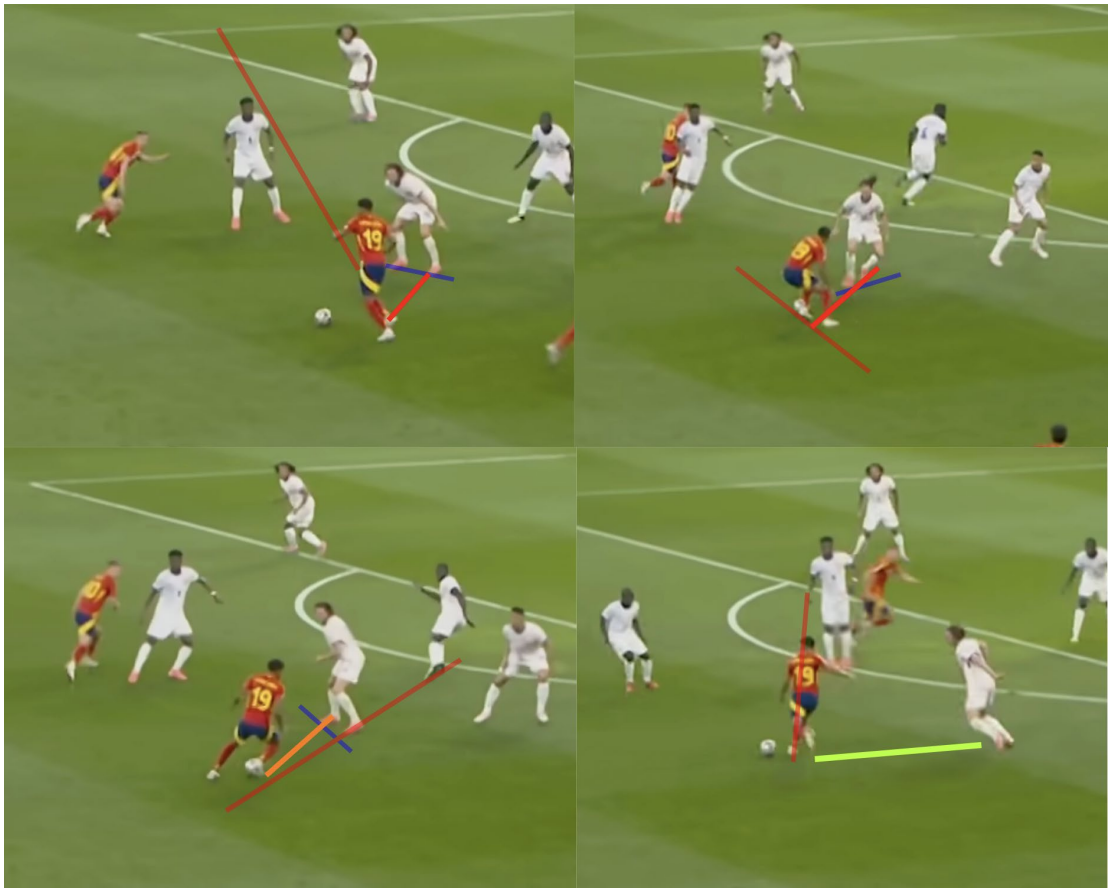

Fig. 2 Spatial Manipulation and Advantage Creation in Lamine Yamal's Dribbling

5. Conclusion

Through a combined statistical and contextual analysis of Lamine Yamal, alongside comparison with Nico Williams, this study concludes that dribbling efficiency among elite wingers is not primarily determined by physical explosiveness or raw speed.

Instead, efficiency stability is dependent on decision making, including spatial awareness, deliberate receiving orientation, timing and selection of execution.

Dribbling, in this framework, is not simply an athletic action — it is a decision process backed by gifted technique.

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