A BRIEF HISTORY OF PREDICTING FOOTBALL OUTCOMES

From the 5 Guinea Newspaper Competition (1886)
to the
Football Predictor Dice

The more football changes, the more outcomes stay the same!

www.armchairsportscompany.com

Millions of people regularly attempt to predict football results and scores for money, as part of a predictor league or just for fun with family and friends. The popular pastime is an established feature of the modern game but its origins pre-date the start of English league football and the initial newspaper competitions of the 1880s laid the foundations for the popular Football Pools and multi-billion-pound betting industry of today. This is the third century in which fans and punters have made predictions and although the early predictors of the Victorian era would no doubt be amazed at the spectacle of modern-day football and the opportunities offered by technology, they would quickly realise that parallels can still be drawn with the burgeoning sport of their era.

Jonathan Wilson's book, *Inverting the Pyramid,* provides an insightful overview and analysis of how tactics, formations and styles of play have developed through the decades as innovative coaches have sought to make their mark on the sport. However, despite all of the football advancements, rule changes and increased use of statistical analysis, when we consider match results, scores and average goals per match, from the start of the Football League to the end of the 26th Premier League season, it is evident that not much has changed in the way of match outcomes. Throughout the history of the English top division, fans could expect to see an average of roughly three goals per game with approximately half of all matches won by the home side, a quarter drawn and a quarter won by the away side. Indeed, ***the more the game changes, the more that results stay the same.***

Period	Seasons	Matches	Goals	Ave G/M	Home	Draw	Away
Start – WW1	1888/89 – 1914/15	7,960	25,236	3.17	56%	21%	23%
WW1 - WW2	1919/20 – 1938/39	9,240	30,339	3.28	55%	24%	22%
WW2 – PL	1946/47 – 1991/92	20,964	61,485	2.93	50%	26%	24%
All Division 1*	1888/89 – 1991/92	38,164	117,060	3.07	52%	24%	23%
Premier League	1992/93 – 2017/18	10,126	26,783	2.64	46%	26%	27%
All Top Division*	1888/89 – 2017/18	48,290	143,843	2.98	51%	25%	24%

*Excludes the 33 matches played in the 1939/40 season before the league was suspended.

Despite the odd high-scoring match, goals are a rare event in football and scores have been fairly consistent since the Scotsman William McGregor introduced the idea of league football to England. The most common five scores across Division 1 and the Premier League are 1-1, 1-0, 2-1, 2-0 and 0-0. On the first day of the Football League, 8 September 1888, Wolverhampton Wanderers drew 1-1 with Aston Villa and Everton beat Accrington 2-1. Almost 129 years later to the day, on 16 September 2017, Huddersfield Town drew 1-1 with Leicester City, Liverpool drew 1-1 with Burnley and Newcastle United beat Stoke City 2-1. ***The more the game changes, the more that scores stay the same.***

Most Common Scores	Division 1 1888/89 – 1991/92	Premier League 1992/93 – 2017/18	Top Division (All Matches) 1888/89 – 2017/18
1-1	11%	12%	11%
1-0	9%	11%	9%
2-1	9%	9%	9%
2-0	8%	8%	8%
0-0	6%	8%	7%

The table shows the scores as a percentage of all matches played in Division 1, the Premier League and all top division English league matches, excluding the 33 matches played in the 1939/40 season.

The allure of making football predictions has been, and will continue to be, an intrinsic part of the sport for millions of people around the globe. Football may be unrecognisable from its 19th century origins but it is still the case today that anything can happen in a match and any forecast is just a best guess. As favourites do not always win football matches and no score can be predicted with absolute certainty, even by informed experts or sophisticated algorithms, there is always the **FOOTBALL PREDICTOR DICE**, which offer a plausible option for matches that are ***too close to call*** or when predictors are just uncertain about the outcome. Regardless of how well informed the predictor is or whether they are rolling a **DICE**, to make a successful forecast, whether it be a series of results, an individual match score or even a competition winner, the most important thing is to be **LUCKY**. It has been that way since 1886 and it isn't about to change anytime soon.

The Early Days of Predicting Football Outcomes: The Reign of Queen Victoria to the end of World War I

Whilst the practice of predicting and betting on match outcomes is as old as the game of football itself, the British Newspaper Archive (*www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk*) includes an early, if not the earliest, example of a formal football prediction competition. Coupons were published in the *Cricket and Football Field* on 18 September 1886 with a prize of five guineas for predicting the last four clubs and winners of that season's Football Association Cup and Senior Lancashire Association Cup, and a prize of two guineas for naming the last four clubs and winner of the Lancashire Junior Cup.

Cricket and Football Field (18 September 1886)	Cup Results

OUR

POPULAR PRIZE COMPETITIONS.
A PRIZE OF FIVE GUINEAS.

The Publishers of *Football Field* will give FIVE GUINEAS to the subscriber who names the LAST FOUR CLUBS LEFT IN, together with the ABSOLUTE WINNERS of the Competitors, for the FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION CUP and for the SENIOR LANCASHIRE ASSOCIATION CUP, conjointly.

COUPON.
LAST FOUR CLUBS LEFT IN.

ENGLISH CUP.   LANCASHIRE CUP.

1........................   1........................
2........................   2........................
3........................   3........................
4........................   4........................

CUP WINNERS.

ENGLISH.   LANCASHIRE.

....

Name of Sender ....
Address in full ....

....

Coupons must reach our office not later than SATURDAY MORNING, October 2nd.

FA Cup

Winner: Aston Villa

Final: Aston Villa 2-0 West Bromwich Albion

Semi-Finals:
Aston Villa 3-1 Rangers
West Bromwich Albion 3-1 Preston North End

Senior Lancashire Cup

Winner: Preston North End

Final: Preston North End 3-0 Bolton Wanderers

Semi-Finals:
Preston North End 12-0 Witton
Bolton Wanderers 4-1 Padiham

This was certainly not an easy competition for the Victorian era football fans, as 124 teams entered the 16th edition of the FA Cup and 26 teams took part in the Lancashire Senior Cup.

On 9 April 1887, a week after Aston Villa won the FA Cup, and a full six months after coupons were submitted, the newspaper announced the result of the competition. Over a thousand coupons were received and, unsurprisingly, none of the entrants 'hit the mark'. The majority of tipsters predicted that Preston would win both trophies and only one entrant, C Fitzgerald of 64 Lum-street, Bolton, predicted the two cup winners. He was awarded a guinea as a consolation prize for correctly predicting the two cup winners, three of the FA Cup semi-finalists (Aston Villa, Preston North End and West Bromwich Albion) and two of the Senior Lancashire Cup semi-finalists (Preston and Bolton Wanderers). It was an impressive effort although his fourth selection for the FA Cup, Battlefield of Scotland, was a curious one as they did not enter the competition. Ironically, the other losing semi-finalist was another Glasgow team, Rangers.

The first round of the Lancashire Junior Cup involved 46 clubs and a review of the newspaper archive did not find any evidence of a winning entry or a prize being awarded to a subscriber.

A PRIZE OF TWO GUINEAS

will also be presented to the subscriber who tips the last four clubs in, and the Winner of, the LANCASHIRE JUNIOR CUP COMPETITION.

LAST FOUR CLUBS.

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....

WINNING TEAM.

....

Name of Sender...

Address in full..

....

Coupons must reach our office not later than SATURDAY MORNING, September 25th.

Coupons must be forwarded to Editor, CRICKET & FOOTBALL FIELD, Bolton. Any number may be sent by one individual.

Junior Lancashire Cup

Winner: Bell's Temperance

Final: Bell's Temperance 1-0 Lowerhouse

Semi-Finals:
Bell's Temperance 4-0 Earlstown
Lowerhouse 3-2 Fleetwood Rangers

The initial competitions proved a success and the concept was developed further in the following season when the *Cricket and Football Field* introduced competitions for readers to win ten shillings for predicting single match results. This led to the introduction, in September 1887, of a matchday coupon that required 'couponniers' to predict the scores of four matches, although the newspaper referred to results. Entrants were allowed to send in as many coupons as they liked for a one penny stamp and the prize fund of one guinea was to be divided between winning entries. The related matches were played on 17 September 1887, pre-dating the oldest football league in the world, the English Football League, which began 12 months later in September 1888.

NEXT WEEK'S COMPETITION.

A PRIZE OF ONE GUINEA

Will be given to the Competitor who predicts the results of *all* the following matches, which are played NEXT SATURDAY, September 17th, on the first-mentioned ground. In the event of more than one Couponnier guessing the correct results, the prize will be divided :—

	GOALS.		GOALS.
NORTH END	....	v. NOTTS FOREST	....
WANDERERS	....	v. BURNLEY	....
EVERTON	....	v. CHURCH	....
HALLIWELL	....	v. ACCRINGTON	....

Name and address of Competitor in full :

....

....

....

The above coupon must be cut out and forwarded to our office not later than FRIDAY NEXT, Sept. 16th. Any Coupons reaching us later will be destroyed.

Competitors are not restricted to one Coupon, but may send in as many as they choose for ONE PENNY STAMP.

FOOTBALL FIELD Office,
Mawdsley Street, Bolton.
Sept. 10th, 1887.

Football Prize Competitions,

THE NORTH END v. NOTTS FOREST, &c., COMPETITION.

This has proved a spirited effort on the part of football competitors, but the predictions are all wide of the mark. The matches resulted as follow :—North End 5, Notts Forest 2; Wanderers 1, Burnley 4; Everton 2, Church 2; Halliwell 2, Accrington 2. The nearest guess was made by John Youds, 46, Hartington-road, Preston, who sent in the following :—North End 5, Notts Forest 1; Wanderers 1, Burnley 3; Everton 3, Church 2; Halliwell 3, Accrington 2.

No winning entries were submitted and the predictions were all deemed 'wide of the mark', although the nearest guess, by John Youds, was only a goal out in each of the four, high-scoring matches.

Despite gambling on football being illegal at this time, the practice of predicting match outcomes in newspaper competitions was deemed acceptable as it was considered to be a game of skill and not chance. It must have been an interesting debate because successfully predicting outcomes, especially a combination of matches or a single score, has always relied more on chance than skill. To deem making predictions a game of skill ignores the fact that it is a combination of random factors, including luck, that determine the outcome of a football match. Whilst it can be difficult enough to predict a match result after considering relevant information, such as the history of the fixture, recent form and injuries/suspensions, it is impossible to predict a match score with absolute certainty. Regardless of tactics, formations or the quality of the players, anything can happen during a match and favourites do not always win. Since the time of the football pioneers, forwards have missed chances, goalkeepers have dropped the ball and officials have got decisions wrong that have directly or indirectly influenced the outcome. The only feature of football that has remained constant since the game was invented is that the score at kick-off is 0-0. After that, anything can happen.

The *Cricket and Football Field* might have introduced football prediction competitions to newspapers but it wasn't long until their peers and competitors developed their own competitions. At the start of the 1895/96 season, on 31 August 1895, the *Sheffield Evening Telegraph and Star* offered a weekly prize of £10 for predicting the correct results of twelve fixtures, eight from Division 1 and four from the Midland League. If no entrants guessed the twelve results, £3 was divided amongst those getting eleven correct results and the £7 balance was carried forward. If there were no winners, the whole prize fund was carried forward. No stake was required and the cost of entry was basically the halfpenny spent purchasing the newspaper.

Sheffield Evening Telegraph and Star (31 August 1895)		Fixtures – 7 September 1895	

Fixtures – 7 September 1895

	SCORES	RESULTS
Division 1		
Stoke 2–1 Derby County		Home
Sunderland 2–1 Blackburn Rovers		Home
West Bromwich Albion 0–2 Burnley		Away
Everton 6–1 Notts Forest		Home
Preston North End 4–3 Wolverhampton Wanderers		Home
Sheffield Wednesday 1–0 Sheffield United		Home
Bury 0–3 Bolton Wanderers		Away
Aston Villa 7–3 Small Heath		Home
Midland League		
Mansfield 3–2 Ilkeston Town		Home
Barnsley 4–0 Wellingborough		Home
Gainsborough Trinity 1–1 Doncaster Rovers		Draw
Grantham Rovers 0–2 Kettering		Away

The newspaper's readers were informed on 10 September 1895 that no one had predicted 12 results but that £3 would be divided between a 'tremendous army' of 38 entrants with 11 correct results.

Towards the end of the 19th century, predictor competitions had become a regular feature in newspapers and stringent conditions for entering and claiming prizes were strictly adhered to. During the 1898/99 season, the *Sheffield Weekly Telegraph* ran a weekly 'Football Skill Competition' with separate coupons for Association Football and Rugby. Each coupon contained 12 fixtures for each code and the prize was £25 for predicting all of the results in either coupon. If the top prize was not won, a consolation prize of £10 was available for 10 or 11 correct results. The first column of the coupon was free to enter, excluding the cost of the paper and any postage, with additional columns costing one penny, to be paid in stamps or by postal order. Coupons had to be received by the paper between the Monday and noon on the Friday preceding the day of the fixtures with coupons received outside of this period deemed invalid. Submitted coupons were kept in the newspaper's 'coupon safe' and winning entrants were required to submit a claim to the newspaper, in writing, by noon of the Tuesday following the matches. A bit different from today, when in-play bets can be placed on mobile devices and any winnings paid directly in to your account when the bet comes up, even before the final whistle is blown.

Victorian football coupons became very popular in Britain and some competitions offered significant prizes. During the 1899/1900 season, a London based company published weekly coupons in various newspapers throughout the nation, including the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, the *Dublin Evening Telegraph* and the *South Wales Echo*. The company was not named in the advert and coupons were simply addressed to "Football", 4 Featherstone Buildings, London, W.C. This is an early example of a company, not a newspaper, offering football predictor competitions. Not only did the company offer various weekly prizes, including £150 to the competitor(s) with the greatest number of correct results for the 12 fixtures, but they also offered £1,000, or an annuity of £1 per week for life, to the competitor who shared in the weekly £150 prize the most times during the season.
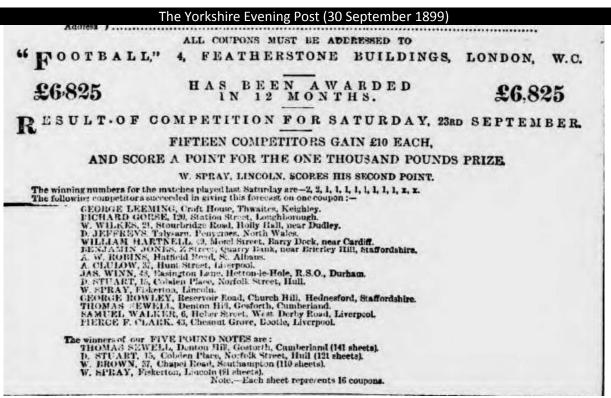
Yorkshire Evening Post (16 September 1899)

Newspaper Image © The British Library Board. All rights reserved. With thanks to the British Newspaper Archive. (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)

Fixtures – 23 September 1899

SCORES	RESULTS
Division 1	
Liverpool 1-2 Everton	2
Preston North End 0-1 Sunderland	2
Notts Forest 1-0 Stoke	1
Wolves 4-0 Glossop North End	1
Burnley 2-0 West Brom	1
Aston Villa 3-1 Blackburn Rovers	1
Newcastle Utd 2-0 Derby County	1
Sheffield United 4-0 Bury	1
Manchester City 5-1 Notts County	1
Division 2	
Walsall 2-0 Woolwich Arsenal	1
Luton 0-0 Leicester Fosse	X
Burton Swifts 0-0 Newton Heath	X

The company did not offer free coupons. Seven coupons cost sixpence and one shilling covered 16 coupons. The shilling payment had to be paid by postal order and not stamps. Instead of getting entrants to note the predicted winning team or the corresponding team number on the coupon, the company introduced **1** for a home win, **2** for an away victory and **X** for a draw. This has been the traditional method of classifying match results for 120 years and is reflected in the sides of the **FOOTBALL PREDICTOR RESULT DICE**. Coupons had to be received by 10am on the day of matches and competitors with ten, 11 or 12 correct results were required to send a postcard or letter in order to claim a share of the prize with results published a week after the matches were played. Anyone claiming to be a prize-winner, but whose name did not appear in the prize list, was required to inform the company within two days of the result being published. However, the claimant was required to enclose one guinea, which would be forfeited if the claim was found to be wrong.

The results were published the following week and 15 entrants had predicted the correct results, each winning £10 and gaining a point towards the big prize. The four people who submitted the most coupon sheets were also awarded a five-pound note.

The Yorkshire Evening Post (30 September 1899)

The weekly coupon competition continued through the season, although following competitor requests, the number of matches was reduced from twelve to ten from the coupon of 17 February 1900. Ironically, owing to cup-ties taking precedence over scheduled League fixtures on that date, only five of the ten matches on the coupon were played. This resulted in the company receiving 3,054 correct entries and, as the amount of winnings was so small, they sent each winner the prize amount in paid coupons for the following week's fixtures.

On the 10 February 1900, W. Spray of Lincoln scored his sixth point and J. Watt of Edinburgh scored his fifth point towards the major prize. From March 1900, coupon results were published exclusively in a new sports paper, Athletic Chat. Unfortunately, the archive does not have copies of this publication and the outcome of the season long competition could not be confirmed.

Football coupons and predictor competitions were popular as Britain entered the twentieth century and the practice continued regardless of major national and international events, such as the death of Queen Victoria and the Second Boer War.

Although gambling on football remained illegal, politicians continued to consider that predicting football results involved skill and not chance. The lawmakers had no issue with private bets between individuals or formal competitions where prizes were guaranteed by reputable newspapers and periodicals. However, they did have a problem with ready money betting on football coupons, where working men and others were parted with money they would never see again, and related bills were passed in 1913 and 1920 to suppress coupon betting.

On Monday 3 August 2014, the *Dundee Courier* published a 'Football Competition' that offered £100 for predicting the results of the Scottish League Division One matches to be played on 15 August, the opening day of the season. Not an easy task, considering there are 59,049 permutations for ten matches. As Scottish fans and punters considered the outcomes that would hopefully make them some money, tensions were mounting in Europe and King Albert of Belgium refused a German request for free passage of its army on the way to France. As a result, Germany declared war on Belgium and France and the following day, Britain declared war on Germany for violating the *Treaty of London (1839)*, which guaranteed the neutrality of Belgium.

Fixtures Played 15 August 1914	
SCORES	RESULTS

Scottish League Division One

Dundee 1-3 Aberdeen	2
Falkirk 1-3 Dumbarton	2
Rangers 1-0 Hamilton	1
Hearts* 2-0 Celtic	1
Clyde 1-0 Hibs	1
Morton 3-1 Kilmarnock	1
Motherwell 1-2 Raith Rovers	2
Ayr United 4-0 Partick Thistle	1
Queen's Park 4-1 St Mirren	1
Airdrie 1-0 Third Lanark	1

By the end of November 1914, six of the Hearts team that defeated Celtic had signed up for military service, five as part of the renowned McCrae's 'Sporting Battalion'. Although captain Bob Mercer sustained a cruciate injury in the match and was unable to sign up with his team-mates, he was subsequently conscripted in 1916. Fans and punters that predicted the Hearts win over Celtic would have celebrated the goals of Harry Wattie and Tom Gracie. Poignantly, both of the goal scorers died in service. Former Everton and Liverpool player Gracie died of leukemia in October 1915 and Wattie was killed on 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. The first player to sign up, winger James Speedie, was killed in action in September 1915, whilst the other four players were all wounded, with three being discharged due to their injuries.

Despite the onset of World War 1, the 1914/15 season was completed as normal. Everton won the English First Division, Sheffield United lifted the FA Cup and 'lucky' football followers enhanced their wealth by correctly predicting results.

The season ended with the Football Association keen to eradicate the practice of bookmakers approaching professional players to fix matches, particularly after the betting scandal involving the match between Manchester United and Liverpool on 2 April 1915. An FA investigation in to the match concluded that the match had been fixed for United, who were struggling to avoid relegation, to win and that players from both teams were involved. Although the investigation determined that club officials were not involved and neither club was punished, the match is nevertheless a shameful episode in the history of England's most decorated clubs and the seven guilty players were initially banned for life before six of the bans were overturned, including posthumously for Sandy Turnbull, in recognition of the contributions of the players to the war effort.

Newspapers published football coupons throughout the war, using fixtures from regional competitions when the Football League and the FA Cup were suspended between 1915 and 1919.

Fixtures Played 7 October 1916	
SCORES	RESULTS

Midland Section

Bradford 1-0 Notts Forest	1
Notts County 5-1 Leicester Fosse	1
Huddersfield 2-1 Sheffield United	1
Rotherham 3-3 Bradford City	X
Grimsby Town 3-1 Chesterfield	1

Lancashire Section

Bolton 0-0 Blackburn Rovers	X
Manchester United 0-0 Liverpool	X
Preston North End 3-1 Bury	1
Burslem Port Vale 1-3 Southport	2
Rochdale 2-2 Manchester City	X

London Combination

Arsenal 3-3 Southampton	X
Clapton Orient 0-4 West Ham	2
Reading 0-2 Brentford	2
Millwall 3-2 Crystal Palace	1

Scottish League

Dundee 1-2 Falkirk	2
Dumbarton 1-4 Greenock Morton	2
Aberdeen 1-2 Airdrieonians	2
Motherwell 2-2 Hamilton Acads	X

People continued to predict match results even whilst relatives, friends and neighbours were enduring the horrors of the trenches in northern France. On the 30 September 1916, approximately two-thirds through the Battle of the Somme (1 July - 18 November 1916), the Sports Argus, a Birmingham based newspaper, published a coupon that featured a selection of matches to be played on 7 October 1916. Readers had the chance to win 50 guineas for predicting 18 correct results, £25 for 17 or, failing that, £5 as a consolation prize for the best entry. Mr J Hall of Smethwick won the consolation prize after correctly predicting 14 results.

Littlewoods and the Birth of the Football Pools

A major event in the history of football predictor competitions occurred within five years of the First World War ending when Littlewoods launched the Football Pools in 1923. Interestingly, for a company that would develop such a strong Merseyside football connection, their first coupon was distributed to fans outside of Old Trafford, Manchester. Although slow to take off and become profitable, the Football Pools grew to become a regular weekly pastime in households throughout the country. The basic premise of the competition was for entrants to try and select matches that would finish as score draws, with points awarded depending on the match result. Despite the Pools being similar to newspaper competitions, John Moores was prosecuted and found guilty under the Ready Money Betting Act. He appealed on the grounds that the Pools did not accept cash, only postal orders that were cashed after the results and total winnings were confirmed. The future Everton Chairman's conviction was upheld and the business never looked back under his family's stewardship.

Despite the courts finding that the Football Pools were legal, this did not stop some politicians or churches from lambasting the practice and several unsuccessful attempts were made to outlaw the Pools during the 1920s and 30s. Similarly, newspaper competitions, long regarded as legal games of skill, also came under attack during this period. The *Sheffield Independent* and *Sheffield Mail* were informed, at the start of the 1927/28 season, that this was no longer the case and that such contests were illegal. The newspapers considered the matter before resuming their weekly coupon, in line with the wishes of their readers, and the competition continued throughout the season.

The Pools provided the nation's population with an opportunity to win large amounts for low stakes and, since they started, over £3.2 billion has been paid out in prize money to over 61 million people. Significant winners include Mrs Knowlson of Manchester, who became the first £100,000 winner in 1950 and Rodi Woodcock, London, who won £2m in 1994 from a stake of 54p.

Littlewoods was an innovative and popular company. Australian football coupons were introduced in the summer of 1951 to ensure that the Pools could be played all year round, whilst in 1963, following an extreme cold spell that wiped out football for 3 weeks, a board of football experts, 'The Pools Panel', was established to confer and decide on the result of postponed matches.   This was an interesting development as it meant that predictions could be determined and fortunes won or lost on a result, or results, where a ball wasn't even kicked in anger.

The Football Pools continued to thrive until the National Lottery was introduced in 1994. This had a significant impact on the competition and the number of weekly participants fell from a peak of 10 million to around 350,000 today.

How the Football Pools Work

Players select 10 fixtures that they think will be score draws from a list of 49 matches.
Points are awarded, based on the result, for each selected fixture:
- **3 points for a score draw**
- **2 points for a no-score draw**
- **1 point for a home or away win.**

The total points from the highest scoring eight selections are added together. Cash prizes are usually awarded for 24, 23 and 22 points.

The Betting and Gaming Act (1960) and the Birth of Modern Football Betting

The decades long debate around whether predicting football outcomes was a game of chance or skill was muted when politicians passed *The Betting and Gaming Act (1960).* With the Football Pools established as a regular weekly pastime and newspapers continuing to run regular prediction competitions the Act legalised gambling in the UK and allowed betting shops to open and accept bets on football and other popular sports, such as cricket and rugby, for the first time from 1 May 1961. Prior to this, bookmaking was restricted to dog and horse racing at racetracks. The Act was a major moment in the history of football betting with further restrictions lifted over the next 50 years to enable the birth and growth of the industry that we are familiar with today. It seems inconceivable now, but for years you could only bet on a single match if it was televised live. Otherwise punters had to include at least three matches in a football bet. Times have certainly changed with bookmakers now offering a wide variety of betting markets for individual matches.

The advent of Sky, the ever-growing number of live televised matches, a competitive bookmaking market and the arrival of the internet has broadened football betting choices with the emergence of online accounts and in-play betting meaning you don't even have to leave the comfort of your own home to place a bet, even if the match has started.

There are undoubtedly more betting choices available to football fans and punters but the practice of predicting results and scores remains popular, even where a prize is not on offer. SkyBet's Super6, which offers £1m for correctly predicting six scores, attracted over 2.3 million entries in 2017/18, whilst the season long BBC Premier League Predictor, which had no prize, was played by 200,000 people in 2016/17. Both competitions were free to enter.

Football Experts

As football and prediction competitions became more popular and prizes on offer got higher, football knowledge, or perceived knowledge, became a valued asset. Whilst army officers were busy planning and executing battle tactics and military strategy in continental Europe, football experts in Britain were analysing football results in order to devise and sell winning systems and tips to predictors, or at least the more gullible ones. Two days before the Armistice of 11 November 2018, page 2 of the *Sports Argus* contained a headline announcing the 'ABDICATION OF THE KAISER' above adverts in the 'Sporting Announcements' section for *The Football Forecaster* and *Paying Systems in Football.*

The Football Forecaster was a weekly publication that included combination forecasts, home and away certs and other interesting information for football enthusiasts whilst *Paying Systems in Football* contained 'really sensible and valuable plans' to make punters successful at any kind of football forecasting competition.

It was a natural progression for newspapers to provide opinion and tips alongside competitions, fixtures and match reports. Just before the outbreak of World War II, on the 23 August 1939, *The Star (Sheffield)*, printed a 'Complete Pools Guide' for the matches to be played on 2 September 1939. The guide was comprehensive but the expert predictions were not successful. Tips and forecasts were included from an unidentified Main Expert, *The Star's* team of four experts (F.G. Walters, Fusilier, Admiral and Heathen) and a 'How 18 Forecast'*,* which was a table of forecasts from 18 experts from other leading newspapers.

Forecasts were provided for 63 fixtures, covering Divisions 1, 2, 3 (North & South) in England and Divisions 1 and 2 in Scotland. All of the experts predicted the correct result for only 10 (16 per cent) of the fixtures and there were 13 fixtures (20 per cent) that, rather incredibly, none of the 23 experts got right. The combined expert success rate for all matches was 47 per cent and only nine of the Main Expert's 20 'Pick of the Tips' selections were correct.

Ironically, given that Britain declared war on Germany the following day and this was the last official league fixtures until 1946, the most successful expert was the Fusilier, with a success rate of 57 per cent.

Football outcomes, whether they relate to individual matches or tournaments, are not easy to predict and never have been. In *The Numbers Game,* Chris Anderson and David Sally analysed final scores and odds for all of the matches played in the Champions League and the top five European football leagues (England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain) in 2010/11. They identified that the pre-match favourites won just over half of their matches. As research for this article, similar analysis was undertaken of the 64 top-level matches played in England and Scotland over the weekend of 24-25 February 2018. Only 44 per cent of the matches were won by the pre-match favourites, as per the odds set by the bookmakers.

Some newspapers still offer football prediction analysis and tips although the experts were no more successful in February 2018 than they were in August 1939. Indeed, the expert tipsters in Scotland's two biggest selling newspapers, Mr Fixit (the *Daily Record)* and the Bookie Basher *(The Sun),* failed to recommend a winning bet between them that weekend.

Mr Fixit correctly predicted 23 of the 64 results, a success rate of 36 per cent, and none of his recommended six 'Top Tip' selections, including his 'Fivefold', came close to winning money for any of his followers. Even his 'SuperSingle' prediction, **Raith Rovers** to beat Arbroath, proved to be the wrong selection. The odds of 19/20 appeared to represent good value as Raith had won 12 of their 13 home games but it wasn't to be and the result was a 2-2 draw.

The Bookie Basher also had a day to forget with just five of his ten predicted results being correct. His main tip was his 'Weekend Acca', where he correctly forecast only three of the five results. His two single match result predictions, **Kilmarnock** to beat Hibs (2-2) and **Sheffield Wednesday** to beat Aston Villa (2-4) were also both wrong.

Mr Fixit *(Daily Record)*				
Fivefold	*Score*	*Result*	*Prediction*	
Preston v Ipswich	0-1	2	1	
Wigan v Rochdale	1-0	1	1	√
Falkirk v Dumbarton	0-0	X	1	
Raith v Arbroath	2-2	X	1	
Stranraer v **Alloa**	1-0	1	2	

Bookie Basher (*Sun*)				
WEEKEND ACCA	*Score*	*Result*	*Prediction*	
Plymouth v Bradford	1-0	1	1	√
Charlton v Shrewsbury	0-2	2	1	
Wigan v Rochdale	1-0	1	1	√
Notts County v Stevenage	2-0	1	1	√
Luton v Cheltenham	2-2	X	1	

It was certainly a bad weekend for the experts and the combined failure of these knowledgeable specialists underlines how difficult it is to predict results despite there being only three possible outcomes for each match. When it comes to scores, the chance of making a correct prediction is much more difficult. Even when there is a clear favourite and the result is expected there is no way of accurately predicting the number of goals each team will score. None of Mr Fixit's five score forecasts were correct. Only two of the ten sides scored the amount of goals predicted and three of the related five results were wrong.

The growth of the internet has seen a proliferation of football betting and forecast sites. Some of these sites use algorithms to analyse match stats and guarantee, for a fee, that followers will find more winners, more regularly and that they will consistently take money from bookmakers. Regardless of how sophisticated the algorithm, it is impossible for a computer or individual to correctly predict every result or score with absolute certainty. No person, process or computer program will ever be able to foresee the thousands of random events that combine to determine a match result or score. Regardless of tactics, formations or the quality of the players, anything can happen during a match. Football has always been a game of random events combining to determine the outcome. Deflected shots go in, forwards miss easy chances, goalkeepers drop the ball, players get sent off and the combination of such unpredictable events directly or indirectly influences the outcome of a match.

Whilst predicting match outcomes can be difficult enough, predicting competition outcomes takes football guessing to a different level. The earliest newspaper prediction competitions that we identified in our research concerned predicting the semi-finalists and winners of the FA Cup, Lancashire Senior and Junior Cup in 1886. Unsurprisingly, no correct predictions were received by the *Cricket and Football Field* and predicting competition outcomes before a ball has been kicked is certainly still as much of a challenge over 130 years later. Or is it?

Manchester City started the 2018/19 season as better than evens favourites and the 12 experts in the *Sun on Sunday's* '2018/19 Premier League Guide' were unanimous in their assertion that City would regain the title. Of course, City may not win the league, but it is incredible, especially given the expensively constructed squads and highly talented players of their rivals, that a league which prides itself on being amongst the most competitive in the world was deemed, by a panel of experts, to be over nine months before the trophy is due to be presented.

It has become an annual pre-season tradition for fans, pundits and punters to look in to their crystal balls and predict the winners of the various league and cup competitions. Predicting league champions for the various divisions in England essentially involves guessing the collective outcome of 380 matches for the Premier League and 552 matches for each of the other leagues. Taking the odds from ante post coupons for the last three seasons as a guide, it is evident how difficult the task is. Only four of the last 12 league winners in England were seen as pre-season favourites with each of the four leagues won only once by a favourite in this period.

Analysis of English League Winners and Predicted Finish by Ante Post Odds (2015/16 – 2017/18)

	Premier League 20 Teams	Predicted Finish	Championship 24 Teams	Predicted Finish	League One 24 Teams	Predicted Finish	League Two 24 Teams	Predicted Finish
2017/18	Manchester City	1st	Wolves	6th	Wigan Athletic	2nd	Accrington Stanley	=13th
2016/17	Chelsea	=3rd	Newcastle United	1st	Sheffield United	1st	Portsmouth	1st
2015/16	Leicester City	=13th	Burnley	=4th	Wigan Athletic	2nd	Northampton Town	=6th

The predicted 2018/19 league winners, based on the ante post odds quoted in the Ladbrokes 'League Winners' coupon, were Manchester City, Stoke City, Sunderland and MK Dons or Notts County.

English League Ante Post Favourites and Odds (2018/19)

	Premier League 20 Teams	Odds	Championship 24 Teams	Odds	League One 24 Teams	Odds	League Two 24 Teams	Odds
2018/19	Manchester City	8/11	Stoke City	11/2	Sunderland	3/1	MK Dons Notts County	6/1

Forecasting league champions in advance of any matches being played is certainly a challenge but at least the predictor knows what matches will be played to determine the outcome. It is even more preposterous to predict cup winners in August when there is no information available about any fixtures or how seriously the major clubs will be taking the competitions. The only thing that a predictor can base their selection on is gut-instinct and the FA Cup and League Cup predictions of the 12 experts in the *Sun on Sunday* were split across the 'Top 6' clubs. Whilst they are all either right or wrong about the Premier League, at least eight of them have not picked the FA Cup winners and at least nine will be wrong about the League Cup winners.

	2018/19 *Sun* Predictions	
	FA Cup	League Cup
Arsenal	3	2
Chelsea	1	1
Liverpool	2	2
Manchester City	1	3
Manchester United	4	1
Tottenham Hotspur	1	3

The Armchair Sports Flowchart for Predicting Match Outcomes

Anything can happen during a match and, regardless of what information is available, any tip or forecast is a best guess, especially if it involves multiple matches and the crucial thing is to be **LUCKY.** No person, process or formula can predict football results, scores or competition outcomes with absolute certainty. Following the steps laid out in the Armchair Sports flowchart does not promise correct predictions but it sets out a logical process to follow when predicting an outcome. Although experts would no doubt dismiss the **FOOTBALL PREDICTOR DICE** as a gimmick they provide a **plausible** option when predictors are undecided about a match outcome.

Select a Fixture

Factors to Consider
1.Fixture History
2.Recent Form
3.Injuries/Suspensions (Key Players)
4.Gut Instinct

Confident Enough to Predict the Outcome?

YES	NO
	Roll the Football Predictor Dice
Predict the Outcome	**Predicted Outcome**

Every competition produces unexpected outcomes and the Premier League is no exception. Surprise results have been a regular feature since the first weekend in August 1992 when Sheffield United beat Manchester United 2-1, Arsenal lost 4-2 at home to Norwich City and Nottingham Forest beat Liverpool 1-0 at Anfield. The first set of results set the trend and, whilst there are clear favourites in some matches, no fixture result is a foregone conclusion due to the competitive nature of the league.

A review of the Premier League fixtures of 25-27 August 2018 underlined how difficult it is to correctly predict results. After considering the four factors in step 1 of the flowchart process, five of the ten matches appeared predictable with Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool, Man City and Watford identified as being favourites to win. With the exception of Watford, who were the same odds to win or lose, the bookmakers agreed with these predictions. Four of the five sides won as expected with the only surprise being at Molineux, where Wolves, in their third league match since being promoted, managed to draw against Man City. The matches in the remaining half of the fixture list were more difficult to predict and one possible solution was *to let the* **FOOTBALL PREDICTOR DICE** *decide.*

Based on pre-match odds, only four of eight matches (50 per cent) finished in line with bookmaker expectations. Neither of the other two fixtures had a pre-match favourite, with the odds for a home or away victory in either match being the same (6/4). Confirmation that favourites don't always win and how difficult a task it is to correctly predict results.

PREMIER LEAGUE FIXTURES (25–27 August 2018)										
Fixture	**Pre-Match Fixed Odds**			**Factors to Consider**				**Predicted Result**	**Score**	**Result**	**In Line with Lowest Odds**
	1	**X**	**2**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**				
Arsenal v West Ham	4/11	10/3	11/2	A			A	Home	3-1	1	√
Bournemouth v Everton	11/8	9/4	6/4	B			?	**ROLL DICE**	2-2	X	
Fulham v Burnley	EVS	11/5	11/5	F			?	**ROLL DICE**	4-2	1	√
Huddersfield v Cardiff	6/5	2/1	2/1				?	**ROLL DICE**	0-0	X	
Liverpool v Brighton	1/6	5/1	9/1	L	L		L	Home	1-0	1	√
Man Utd v Tottenham	6/4	21/10	6/4	MU	TH		?	**ROLL DICE**	0-3	2	JF
Newcastle v Chelsea	10/3	12/5	4/6	NU	C		C	Away	1-2	2	√
Southampton v Leicester	5/4	21/10	6/4	S X	LC	S~	?	**ROLL DICE**	1-2	2	
Watford v Crystal Palace	6/4	21/10	6/4	X	W		W	Home	2-1	1	JF
Wolves v Man City	7/1	9/2	2/9	W	MC	W*	MC	Away	1-1	X	

~Vardy suspended for Leicester / *De Bruyne injured for Man City

The Football Predictor Dice

Predicting football outcomes has been a popular pastime since before the formation of the English Football League. Whilst there is no denying that some people have been successful, and in some cases have won significant amounts, the one thing they all had in common was **luck**.

Football fans, pundits and punters predict match results and scores with confidence and an optimistic belief that they can foresee the outcome of 90 minutes of incident packed action. However, although some match results may appear easier to predict than others, no team or competition is immune from shock results and any prediction is a guess, informed or otherwise and some matches are just *too close to call*. Whether it's a derby, a top of the league clash between two in-form sides or a meeting between relegation candidates at the other end of the table, sometimes the only option is to reach for the **FOOTBALL PREDICTOR DICE**.

Based on actual outcomes, the **FOOTBALL PREDICTOR DICE** are simple to use and offer a **fun, novel** and **plausible** way of making predictions. If you want to predict a result, pick a match and roll the 8-sided result dice. If you want to predict a score, roll the 10-sided goals dice for each side and it will predict the number of goals. If a 3 is thrown, simply roll the dice again and add the numbers to give the predicted number of goals.

The dice are not mutually exclusive and a result dice prediction may not be consistent with a score prediction.

*The 8-sided **Result Dice** offers a 50 per cent chance of predicting a home win **(1)** and a 25 per cent of predicting a draw **(X)** or an away victory **(2)**. As shown below, this is comparable with actual results from Division 1, the Premier League and the Champions League. It also reflects what distinguished Cambridge University Professor, and renowned statistician, David Spiegelhalter calls the 48/26/26 law, namely that historical records show 48 per cent of matches are home wins, 26 per cent are draws and 26 per cent are away wins.*

			Home Wins	Draws	Away Wins
Football Dice Ratios			50%	25%	25%
Division 1*	1888/89 – 1991/92	38,164 matches	52%	24%	23%
Premier League	1991/92 – 2017/18	10,126 matches	46%	26%	27%
Champions League	1991/92 – 2017/18	4,807 matches	50%	23%	27%
48/26/26 Law (Professor David Spiegelhalter)			48%	26%	26%

*Excludes the 33 matches played in the 1939/40 season before the league was suspended.

*Predicting results can be difficult enough but, even in matches where there is an overwhelming favourite, predicting the number of goals each side will score is impossible to do with absolute certainty. The 10-sided **Goals Dice** predicts the number of goals each side will score and ratios reflect actual scores from Division 1, the Premier League, the Champions League and the World Cup. The table below compares the chance of the dice predicting the most common five scores in each competition.*

Most Common Scores	Chance — Goals Dice	Scores as % of All Matches played in Competition (90 minutes only)				
		Division 1 — 1888/89 – 1991/92	Premier League — 1992/93 – 2017/18	European Cup — 1955/56 – 1991/92	Champions League — 1992/93 – 2017/18	World Cup* — 1930 - 2018
1-1	9%	11%	12%	8%	10%	11%
1-0	9%	9%	11%	10%	11%	18%*
2-1	9%	9%	9%	9%	8%	14%*
2-0	9%	8%	8%	10%	8%	10%*
0-0	9%	6%	8%	7%	8%	9%

*Matches played at neutral venues so includes 1-0+0-1, 2-1+1-2 & 2-0+0-2.

A set of dice can be purchased from www.armchairsportscompany.com for £5.99.
This **includes** Royal Mail delivery within the UK (£2.95).