

# Impact of stability on the performance of Persian Gulf Pro League football clubs

## Impacto de la estabilidad en el rendimiento de los clubes de fútbol de la Copa del Golfo Pérsico

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**Abstract:** The objective of this study was to determine the impact of stability/instability on the performance of Persian Gulf Pro League football clubs. All the clubs that had participated in more than 3 seasons of the last 17 seasons (2001-2019) of the Persian Gulf Pro League were analyzed in this study (n=26). The performance of each team (improvement or worsening in ranking) and their stability were analyzed year after year in the period 2001-2019. The stability was divided in four components: CEO, head coach, players and club. The statistical analysis was performed with the software SPSS. Stability significantly ( $p<0.05$ ) increased performance and instability significantly ( $p<0.05$ ) decreased performance of the clubs in the four components studied: CEO, head coach, players and club. Therefore, it is expected that the results of this study encourage Iranian football clubs to increase their stability.

**Keywords:** stability; performance; sport management; football.

**Resumen:** El objetivo de este estudio fue determinar el impacto de la estabilidad/inestabilidad en el rendimiento de los clubes de fútbol de la Copa del Golfo Pérsico. Todos los clubes que habían participado en más de 3 temporadas de las últimas 17 temporadas (2001-2019) de la Copa del Golfo Pérsico fueron analizados en este estudio (n=26). El rendimiento de cada equipo (mejora o empeoramiento en el ranking) y su estabilidad se analizaron año tras año en el período 2001-2019. La estabilidad se dividió en cuatro componentes: director, entrenador, jugadores y club. El análisis estadístico se realizó con el software SPSS. La estabilidad aumentó significativamente ( $p<0.05$ ) el rendimiento y la inestabilidad disminuyó significativamente ( $p<0.05$ ) el rendimiento de los clubes en los cuatro componentes estudiados: director, entrenador, jugadores y club. Por lo tanto, se espera que los resultados de este estudio animen a los clubes de fútbol iraníes a aumentar su estabilidad.

**Palabras clave:** estabilidad; rendimiento; gestión deportiva; fútbol.

### 1. Introduction

Clubs are an important part of the sports industry and they have to face up to the challenge of increasing competition. Factors affecting the performance of sports clubs can be examined at three general levels: macro-level, meso-level and micro-level. The macro-level factors include political, economic, cultural, social and international conditions of the country. The micro-level factors are psychological, individual, behavioral, and demographic variables. However, the clubs have been affected mostly by meso-level factors such as management and planning, organization, human and financial resources and infrastructure. In every season of competitions sports clubs strive to improve their skills by providing better performance than in the past season (Montanari, Silvestri & Gallo, 2008). In the meso-level, the factors that influence the performance of a sports club can be classified into three general groups including club management, technical staff and players (Shafiee, Hematinezhad, Dehpanah, & Hosseini, 2012; Audas, Goddard & Rowe, 2006; Adler, Berry & Doherty, 2013).

Nowadays many sports clubs have to face the question

of stability, and this question refers to the factors previously mentioned: club management, technical staff and players. There are different theories and approaches on the impact of stability on the performance of organizations. Concerning stability, several studies support that changing the CEO or head coach of the organization can have a negative impact on its performance. According to this theory, the changes in the management structure cannot eliminate the organization's weaknesses and problems (Greiner, Cummings & Bhambri, 2002; Grusky, 1963; Khanna & Poulsen, 1995; Sakano & Lewin, 1999). This approach emphasizes that the negative consequences of managerial change may not appear in the short term, but in the medium term the performance of the organization can decline.

According to the life cycle approach, new managers can improve the organization's performance over the long term with new processes, teams, and strategies (Greiner et al., 2002). This approach states that the organizational performance can improve in the first eight to ten years after managerial change. However, researchers such as Henderson, Miller & Hambrick (2006) believe that this approach also depends on the type of organization and industry concerned.

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Regarding coaching stability, the first approach is based on the common sense theory and it concerns clubs that, after poor performance, change their coaches in the hope of making an effective move for the future (Audas et al., 2006). Some authors (Balduck & Buelens, 2007; Dobson & Goddard, 2001; Gamson & Scotch, 1964; White, Persad & Gee, 2007) reported that these changes led to improved performance of the club in short-term results and, in some cases, in the overall season results.

Another approach is called vicious circle theory. This approach refers to the unexpected costs that can arise in the process of replacement of the staff, and to the possible instability that rapid changes can generate (Audas et al., 2006). Several authors have reported that the effectiveness of the coach change strategy during the season is doubtful (Allen, Panian & Lotz, 1979; Alidoust Ghahfarkhi & Jalali Farahani, 2010; Audas, Dobson & Goddard, 1997; Bruinshoofd & Ter Weel, 2003; Fizek & D'Itri, 1997; Giambatista, 2004; Grusky, 1963; Scully, 1994, 1995).

Other approach is called ritual scapegoating theory. It defends that the performance of a club on the playing field is more influenced by the characteristics and skills of the players than by the strategies of the coaches. According to this approach, if the players do not have the necessary skills, a change in the technical staff will not work. Also, this approach attributes the dismissal of the technical staff to an attempt of change the public opinion (media and club's supporters pressure). This is supported by some authors that reported that club managers dismissed coaches to reduce pressure of media and supporters (Frick, Barros & Prinz, 2010; Koning, 2003; De Dios Tena & Forrest, 2007).

According to some authors, players' stability improves performance by building trust among team members (Berman, Down & Hill, 2002; Eisenhardt, & Schoonhoven, 1990; Pelled, Eisenhardt & Xin, 1999; Weick & Roberts, 1993). Also, team stability enables players to understand each other in the long run. Playing together on the field, team players can better predict each other's movements and behavior, what makes the game easier. Furthermore, Cohen & Bailey (1997) and Salas, Stagl & Burke (2004) indicated that proper and effective team performance was achieved when all team members worked together in a coordinated and organized way and spent more time together.

Nevertheless, Katz (1982) suggested that uncertainty, unpredictability and a certain level of instability of the team could improve the club performance. In addition, some researches showed that team stability could have a negative impact on team performance (Bantel & Jackson, 1989) because, when the team players stay together for a very long time and there is a high degree of stability in their relationships, it can lead to the stagnation and lack of enthusiasm among the team. According to this approach, to perform effectively

and optimally some players need a challenging and dynamic environment. Montanari et al. (2008) also showed that stability might not always have a positive effect. The opponents could predict the team's actions more easily if the team use repetitive mechanisms and tactics that can lost effectiveness over time (Bantel & Jackson, 1989; Katz, 1982).

Each year, the clubs of the Persian Gulf Pro League make different changes of management, technical staff and/or players, and often new managers and coaches are not given sufficient time to implement their plans. Moreover, sometimes the new managers do not know well the past of the clubs and this can generate inappropriate conclusions and contribute to the future failure of the club. Also, there is a large number of transfers of players in the Persian Gulf Pro League football clubs, which reduces stability and can lead to poor performance of the clubs. Furthermore, continuous transfers are associated with enormous costs. Therefore, the objective of this study was to determine the impact of stability/instability on the performance of Persian Gulf Pro League football clubs.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

All the clubs that had participated in more than 3 seasons of the last 17 seasons (2001-2019) of the Persian Gulf Pro League were analyzed in this study. Therefore, the following 26 teams participated in this study: 1. Persepolis Tehran, 2. Esteghlal Tehran, 3. Sepahan Esfahan, 4. Zobahan Esfahan, 5. Foolad Khuzestan, 6. Pas (Tehran-Hamedan), 7. Saipa (Tehran-Karaj), 8. Fajr Shahid Sepasi Shiraz, 9. Malavan Bandar Anzali, 10. Saba Battery (Tehran-Qom), 11. Abu Muslim Mashhad, 12. Peykan (Tehran-Qazvin-Tehran), 13. Esteghlal Ahvaz, 14. Mes Kerman, 15. Bargh Shiraz, 16. Rah Ahan (Tehran-Ray-Surinet), 17. Tractor Tabriz, 18. Damash Gilan (Esteghlal Rasht-Pegah Gilan), 19. Foolad Tabriz, 20. Padide Mashhad, 21. Siah Jamegan Mashhad, 22. Naft Masjed Soleiman, 23. Pars Jonobi jam, 24. Naft Tehran, 25. Esteghla Khuzestan, 26. Naft Abadan.

### 2.2. Procedure

The research data were extracted from the archives of the Persian Gulf Pro League. The performance of each team (improvement or worsening in ranking) and their stability were analyzed year after year in the period 2001-2019. The stability was divided in four components: CEO, head coach, players and club. CEO stability was defined as the continuity of the CEO during the following season. Head coach stability was defined as the continuity of the head coach during the following season. Players stability was defined as a lower number of changes than the average number of all the clubs

in the same year. Club stability was defined as the combination of the three previous components (continuity of CEO, head coach and players).

### 2.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and independent samples t-test. The statistical analysis was performed with the software SPSS. Levels of significance were set at  $P < 0.05$ .

## 3. Results

The results of the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test showed that the distribution of data was not significantly different from the normal distribution, and then parametric statistical methods

were used to analyze the data. There was a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the impact of CEO instability and stability on the performance of the clubs (a decrease of 2.42 in the rankings after instability and an increase of 1.07 after stability). There was a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the impact of head coach instability and stability on the performance of the clubs (a decrease of 1.47 in the rankings after instability and an increase of 1.32 after stability). There was a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the impact of players instability and stability on the performance of the clubs (a decrease of 1.49 in the rankings after instability and an increase of 1.18 after stability). There was a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the impact of club instability and stability on the performance of the clubs (a decrease of 1.08 in the rankings after instability and an increase of 2.11 after stability). (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Comparison of the impact of stability and instability on the performance of Persian Gulf Pro League football clubs.

Variable	Situation	Average ranking change	Standard deviation	Average difference	t	df	P
CEO	Stability	1.07	4.39				
	Instability	-2.42	4.43	-3.49	-5.32	198	0.01*
Head coach	Stability	1.32	4.62				
	Instability	-1.47	4.19	-2.80	-3.77	152	0.01*
Players	Stability	1.18	4.56				
	Instability	-1.49	4.42	-2.68	-4.28	206	0.01*
Club	Stability	2.11	4.56				
	Instability	-1.08	4.26	-3.19	-4.47	206	0.01*

\*  $P < 0.05$ .

The most frequent impact of instability was negative (worse performance) in all categories: 25 % in CEO, 38 % in head coach, 39 % in players and 45 % in clubs. On the contrary, the most frequent impact of stability was positive (better performance) in all categories: 41 % in CEO, 26 % in head coach, 35 % in players and 30 % in clubs. (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Stability and instability of CEO, head coach, players and clubs in Persian Gulf Pro League.

Situation	CEO	Head coach	Players	Clubs	
Instability	Positive	10 %	24 %	15 %	17 %
	Negative	25 %	38 %	39 %	45 %
Stability	Positive	41 %	26 %	35 %	30 %
	Negative	24 %	12 %	11 %	8 %
Total	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	

## 4. Discussion

Our findings indicated that managerial stability significantly improved club performance, while managerial instability had a negative and significant effect on club performance

in the Persian Gulf Pro League standings. In the absence of managerial stability, an average decline of 2.42 points was observed in the ranking, while with managerial stability, an increase of 1.07 points was observed. In the same vein, many studies, such as Brown (1982), Bruinshoofd et al. (2003), Grusky (1963), and Rowe, Cannella, Rankin & Gorman (2005), showed that managers should be given more time to improve the club performance. They need time to achieve the desired results because it is necessary time to learn, gain experience and adapt to the club.

Past research has shown that managerial change in different situations yields different results, although the results of this and most studies indicate that successive changes usually lead to performance weakness. Giambista (2004) found that changes in basketball clubs during the first year may have a positive effect on the performance and produce a decline in performance later. McTeer, White & Persad (1995) also reported in a study of North American football, basketball, baseball, and hockey clubs that club performance improved immediately after the change in management, and that the overall season performance improved.

According to the researchers, the initial improvement after the change in management is due to the initial shock. This

produces that results in the short run improve, but results in the long run are not so good. De Dios Tena et al. (2007) also reported in a study with the Spanish Premier League football clubs that managerial instability may sometimes have a positive, albeit negligible, effect on club performance. However, what has been reported in most of the research done in different leagues and different disciplines is that managerial stability and lack of continuous changes improve the performance of clubs (Hughes, M., Hughes, P., Mellahi & Guermat, 2010). However, in some cases managerial instability may produce short-term positive results for clubs and, in consequence, changes are not always associated with poor performance. Also, it should be noted that the lifespan of the managers of the Persian Gulf Pro League football clubs has been on average 9 months, and certainly this is not much time for planning, organizing, leading and overseeing the affairs of a professional football club.

Another point to note is that managerial changes usually occur when clubs are going through a downward trend, and the owners and management of the club know that the changes ahead will not guarantee improved club performance and results. They change the management of the club in order to achieve the goals that they want to achieve. For example, Brown (1982) reported that clubs in the English National Football League reported that change was always a routine to attribute poor performance to the dismissed manager, thereby providing a rationale for justifying poor club performance. Koning (2003), on the German Bundesliga football clubs, reported that board members were aware of the fact that change in management was not the best option but, in order to alleviate pressure from the fans and media outlets, they changed their managers. Therefore, it seems that many management changes in sports clubs, especially football clubs, are carried out because of these pressures instead of sport purposes.

The analysis of the findings also showed that coaching stability significantly improved club performance in the Persian Gulf Pro League standings, while a change in club technical staff had a significant negative impact on club performance. Persian Gulf Pro League clubs' performance declined 1.47 points in rankings when there was instability, while it improved 1.32 points when there was stability. In this regard, Grusky (1963), in the first study in this field, showed that the amount of coach changes in clubs is negatively correlated with the average points earned in the league. Also, studies in several sports have showed that there is a significant positive relationship between coaching stability and performance: Scully (1994, 1995) in basketball, baseball and football; Fizek & D'Itri (1997) in basketball; Giambista (2004) in basketball; Brown (1982) in football.

It seems that coaching changes in the middle of seasons have a negative impact on performance. For example, Allen,

Panian & Lotz (1979) reported that midterm coaching changes in the US National Baseball League reduced performance and weakened club results. Moreover, Audas, Dobson & Goddard (1997), in the English Football League, and Bruinshoofd & Ter Weel (2003), in the Dutch Football League, also compared the teams that had crisis and coach change with those who did not and reported that clubs that had dismissed coaches had poorer performance. Therefore, the effectiveness of the coach change strategy during the season should be questioned.

The only research done in this field in Iran was the study of Alidoust Ghahfarkhi and Jalali Farahani (2010). They analyzed the phenomenon of substitution of coaches in Persian Gulf Pro League in the first seven periods of this league and reported that, in all these seven periods, 42 % of clubs switched coaches during the season, with more than 75 % of changes being ineffective and failing to improve results. Although coaching stability improves club performance, coaching changes can sometimes improve performance and at least avoid critics. Similarly, Gamson & Scotch (1964), examining this phenomenon in the National Baseball American League, reported that changing the technical staff following poor results can in some cases be a way to improve club performance and results. Dobson & Goddard (2001) also reported that teams' performance improved when the coach changed, and this was more evident in different seasons. White et al. (2007) reported, in a study in the National Hockey League of America, that the dismissal of coaches and the recruitment of younger and inexperienced coaches could in the short run improve club performance and results. Baldack et al. (2007) also examined the effectiveness of coaching changes in the performance of clubs and reported that, after reviewing the Belgian first and second division clubs, there was trend of improvement in the short term when the clubs changed their technical staff.

The results of the present study are in line with the Vicious Circle Theory (Grusky, 1963), which points out that changes in the technical staff and dismissal and displacement of the club manager often lead to a decrease in club performance. Instability in the club, in addition to imposing high costs of transfer of coaches, in most cases not only does not improve performance but also can lead to a downward trend and poor performance. In this regard, Koning (2003), examining information from five seasons of the Dutch Premier League from 1993 to 1998, reported that coach change is a very common occurrence but its impact on team performance is not clear. There can be several reasons why club managers and owners change their staff while they are aware of the importance of coaching stability. Indeed, another plausible point to consider is the approach mentioned in Grusky's (1963) Ritual Scapegoating Theory, being one of the possible purposes of changing coaches to distract and appease the fans and the media.

Regarding stability of the players, our findings showed that maintaining the main skeleton of the team each year significantly improved the performance of the club, while the lack of stability had a negative and significant effect on the club performance in the league standings. In instability condition, the teams had 1.49 points less, while in the case of stability the teams had 1.18 points more. During the 17 seasons analyzed of the Persian Gulf Pro League, almost every club in each season changed half of its players, which seems to be too much change each season. In this regard, Berman et al. (2002) indicated that individual performance of players improves when they understand how to act in harmony with the other players and, in consequence, team stability has a positive and significant effect on club performance. According to Brands (2008), team stability has a positive and significant effect on the performance of clubs, and club performance is more influenced by team stability than by other variables such as team wealth and assets, contracts, players age and past performance.

The greater the stability of the players and the amount of time they spend together at a club, the better the performance of the team (Berman et al., 2002; Weick and Roberts, 1993). Team stability enables players to understand each other in the long run because playing together for a long time they can predict better each other's movements and behaviors on the field. Cohen et al. (1997) and Salas et al. (2004) also believed that effective team performance is not only achieved by bringing players together, but also when all team members work together in a coordinated and organized manner.

The question of stability in club players and the preservation of the team's skeleton and its positive impact on team per-

formance can be examined from another perspective. Team stability and group stability can be considered as a mediating factor in the relationship between psychosocial factors and team performance, so that stability improves and promotes psychological and social factors in the team in order to improve its performance. The most important psychosocial factors affecting group performance that can be improved in terms of stability of group members are social and group dynamics variables, such as social capital, team commitment, group cohesion and collective efficiency. Therefore, it seems that team stability can improve team performance in several ways, including improving team structure and communication, better technical and tactical understanding of players, greater technical and tactical coordination, team effectiveness, and improving social and psychological factors.

Club managers need sufficient time to develop strategic and operational plans and goals in order to achieve the desired results. The board of directors should support the manager in the face of adversity. However, sometimes the board of directors dismiss the club CEO for various reasons, knowing that changing management does not improve performance and results. It is suggested to the clubs that, when making key decisions such as selecting a new manager, they should consider appropriate indicators for the selection of CEOs to minimize decision-making errors. Regarding stability of players, football clubs should keep in mind that excessive changes endanger technical and psychological coordination and communication between players and with the technical staff. Therefore, it is expected that the results of this study encourage Iranian football clubs to increase their stability.

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