

QUALITIES OF A SOCCER PLAYER

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Throughout my experience as a professional soccer coach at youth, international and professional levels both in the U.K. and the United States I have spent many hours in the assessment of players who aspire to a higher level. I have been asked many times what I look for when observing youth players. Quite simply stated my answer has always been: “Can they play?”

While there are many experienced coaches in this country that will understand this response there are also many coaches and parents who will require a more detailed analysis. While observation is relative to the standard of play (age or ability level) let us look at some of the qualities coaches are seeking at tryouts and provide the background for our evaluations.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE GAME

Positional Play

Players must have an understanding of their offensive and defensive functions (roles) on the field.

Vision

Players should be looking around before they receive the ball to assess their options so that when they receive the ball, they will know where to play the ball. Many players will think about their options only when the ball is at their feet. Often this is too late and will result in a loss of possession.

Awareness

At all times players must know where they are on the field as their positions relate to the location of the ball, their teammates and the opponents.

Instinctive Reaction

The better players will know how to react immediately in any given situation whether under pressure themselves or relieving pressure from teammates. E.G. On offense they will know how and where to run to create passing or shooting opportunities for themselves or teammates. On defense they will know how far and how fast to retreat or how quickly to challenge in order to avert danger.

Adaptability

One of the many beauties of the game is that all players have the opportunity to be the quarterback. Whenever they are in possession they can affect the nature of the game. For this reason players must be able to adapt quickly to any given situation. Players away from the ball on offense and defense must also be able to adapt quickly to the constantly changing “pictures” that the game presents.

Inventiveness

There are many times in a game that players have to use their own individual flair to create shooting or passing opportunities. Players who can turn quickly, evade challenges, shoot off balance or perform their own “tricks” to create opportunities are assets to teams.

PHYSICAL ABILITY

Skill – Application of technique under pressure

There are many facets of the game that will cause a breakdown of technique. Good players are able to maintain technical efficiency under pressure. They will show composure under the following demands.

- Movement of the ball.
- Movement of the body with the ball (body/ball control).
- Opponents.
- As concentration lapses and technique deteriorates when most players are tired, good players will be able to perform under the pressure of fatigue.

MENTAL ABILITY

Confidence

In the make-up of good players physical ability goes hand in hand with mental ability. Not only must players possess good skill but also, they must have the confidence to play to their potential.

Mental Toughness

There are many situations in a game that affect confidence and concentration. E.G. Losing by more than one goal in the latter stages of the game, the team being totally dominated throughout the game, individual breakdown in technique, constantly losing “individual battles” can all result in a loss of confidence and concentration. Mentally tough players will endeavor to perform to their utmost despite those odds.

Impact

Good players have the ability to affect the nature of the game from their positions on the field. Goalkeepers, defenders, midfield players and forwards can all make an impact on the game from their respective roles on the team.

FITNESS

Endurance

Fitness is a vital component of the game. Not only must players have the ability to play for the game's duration but also, they must be able to recover while working in the game. Concentration lapses and skill levels decline when players are tired. Therefore, the greater the soccer endurance the less chance of errors created by fatigue.

Speed

While speed of movement is a wonderful advantage in the game it is not vital to success. However, speed of thought is essential. Good perception and quick reactions save much time. The following elements combined are ideal.

- **Perceptual Speed** is the time that elapses between the occurrence of a situation in a game and its recognition by a player.
- **Reaction Time** is the time that elapses between the occurrence of a situation and a player's initial physical reaction.
- **Contractile Rate** is the rate at which a player is able to get his muscles into action; quickness and explosiveness.
- **Speed of Movement** is how fast a player is able to move over a distance of five to fifteen yards.

Balance and Agility

Good players must have both static balance to resist challenge and dynamic balance (agility) so that they are in control of their bodies while moving without the ball or performing skills of the game.

Strength

As the game presents many challenges both on the ground and in the air, players must have the strength to withstand those challenges.

Naturally, not all players possess all the qualities stated. In fact, not all professional and international players have all those qualities. As a result, when observing players for selection or evaluation, coaches must take into consideration the standard of the game and the level of competition being assessed. The art of good coaching is in combining the talents of the players selected.