



Chiefs FC - The Habit

When I trained as a professional footballer, I had the good fortune to be trained by the best people and clubs in the country. I had a great time learning my trade and I was encouraged to take advantage of what was offered. I grasped every opportunity with both hands, and today I look back at what has become a happy and fulfilling life. Though I trained as a professional, I am now helping others to learn how to play soccer, and become better people.

One of the big ideas that was given to me when I was an 'up and comer' was "habits". Habits were one way I was able to train my mind and body to be ready for soccer and to give myself the best chance to play, and help my fellow teammates. Habits were a way to do the things I should do, as a professional. Though we are not training professional players at Chiefs FC, we are training our youngsters to be better players, and to become better people. With that in mind I thought it would be a good idea to share the habits I (and many other players like me) followed that helped me. You don't have to follow these habits to play at Chiefs FC; you don't have to follow these habits to please me. But please, if you love soccer like we do at Chiefs FC, and if you have a passion to succeed and be that better soccer player and person, use these habits to guide your work. They will make the effort pay off handsomely and you will learn to love and enjoy soccer like never before.

Neil McNab, Sr





Habits: At Home, even with a ball

- Where I come from, we played with a ball every day, from about a year old. I know we won't do that here, but this kind of behavior helps explain the reason why (in general) there is such a vast skills gap between soccer playing nations and those that are not. Anything we can do to help reduce this gap is good for soccer, and happens to be good for kids too.
- I used to play with a soccer ball for about 5 hours a day.
- I used to play with a size 1 ball at home – around the house – so that it was safe.
- I would learn to juggle with tennis balls. With the right soccer trainers on, it was quite easy after a lot of practice. If you can juggle a tennis ball, you can do wonders with a soccer ball.
- I would practice rolling my size 1 ball up the stairs (safely)
- I would watch soccer on TV all the time. I always found myself analyzing the game. Watch some soccer on Fox Soccer (or ESPN) and analyze the games. Ask your teammates, and coaches, about the game and situations and plays you saw. Watch whole games – don't just watch highlights; try to spot the systems being used; focus on one team; who is the play maker; who is playing which position, which recognized player is playing in your position? Watch how attacks develop; watch how the team defends; watch the passing; watch for “easy passes” this will help you wire your brain. Talk to coach – what did you see?
- Enjoyment – it is the MAIN reason why we play. It is fun to watch and to play. You get to run around, get and keep fit, do clever things, and even win now and then. And you get to play with your mates. What more is there?
- Soccer is all about spatial awareness (where are you in relation to the ball, the other players, the potential for opportunities), problem solving (how do you get out of trouble, how do you prevent your teammates from getting into trouble; how to make opportunities), and decision making (what do you do as an individual, and in concert with your teammates, and in reaction to the opposition).



Habits: Attending Practice

- Be On Time. Treat practice as you would a match. Be there on time. If not, advise coach why you could not attend or why you were late. Practice is a team sport; your teammates rely on you on game day, they rely on you to attend practice too.
- Be Prepared. BRING REGULAR SOCCER equipment. Don't assume practice is any less dangerous than a game. You will tackle. You will be tackled. The last thing any team wants is a player to miss a game because they were carelessly injured at practice. Bring your soccer boots and shin guards, and wear proper socks. Bring your ball! And water.
- Attitude. Practice is not “easier” than a game. In fact, in many ways, practice is more important than a game. It is at practice that skills are honed and drills and set pieces perfected. Few teams actively learn much during games; they learn how well their practice is exploited and put to proper use.



Habits: Before Match Day

- Sleep (the night before). We didn't go out the night before a game. We did not attend parties or sleep overs. We did arrange those, but we made sure they were never the night before a game. A season is made up of a group of games and every game counts. So if we disrespect our teammates by turning up tired from a sleepover the night before, we are potentially impacting the whole season.
- Eat Right. Use common sense. The energy you use during the game comes from what you ate the 24 hours before. And, of course stay hydrated before the game (as well as leading up to and during the game).
- Prepared. Your kit – you know what you should be bringing. If you turn up for the game with dirty cleats, one of the opposition will notice and will think negatively of you. In the UK we use to have “boot boys” – this was part of your apprenticeship. As a professional, every one of us actually did this. You need to look after your equipment. Make sure it's clean – and take pride in your shirt and badge.



Habits: Match Day

- Be On Time
- Kit. Soccer cleats should be tied firmly. Never slip cleats on, assuming you simply pulled them off when last you wore them. Undo the string, and tighten from the toe upwards. A loose cleat around the foot leads to the small but important gap between your foot, and the leather. When you go kick a ball and you seek perfect control, your boot will slip ever so slightly and you will not have as good control of the ball as you would like. Don't assume that a tight boot only requires a tight knot – the whole length of the boot should be snug to the foot.
- Kit. Shin guards - wear the right size! If you are tall, don't wear shin guards too high. I see too much of this. Wear them appropriately down the sock, so that your shin is protected. Make sure you know where your shin is. It is not immediately below your knee!
- Preparedness. The team that is better prepared, physically and mentally, will have the best chance to play the game they want to, and win. Your attitude before the game will influence how you arrive at the game, and thus influence all those around you, including the opposition. If you are late, looking lazy, not keen, dressed incorrectly, and fooling around, it sends a signal that suggests you are not a professional. It helps build up confidence in those of the opposition that think themselves professionals.
- Attitude. Before the game, you need to psyche yourself up. Winning first takes place in the mind. If you think like a professional, you will likely behave like a professional and the opponents will be impressed, even intimidated. You need to think of yourself at the start, as a skilled weapon, a professional, that has been doing everything all week to prepare for this game. This is the most important thing you can do this day. And you are proud to help this team play its best.
- Respect. Treat your players, and your opponents, with the greatest respect. You have no idea where each player will end up, or for which team, so it is worthwhile thinking well of others. One day they will think of you.
- Respect the referees. They are trying to focus on allowing us to play our game. They won't, on the whole, influence a match so we should respect them and the decisions of the assistants. Whoever is Captain for our team is the person who is meant to represent our team when communicating with the Referee.
- Communication. If you have a question, ask coach.
- Warm Up. This is critical. Stretching for youngsters is often felt to be overkill. Many young kids think that they didn't pull anything last week, so why do I need to warm up proper now? We never know when you will pull something. The ONLY way to minimize your chances is to warm up properly and stretch all the appropriate muscles.



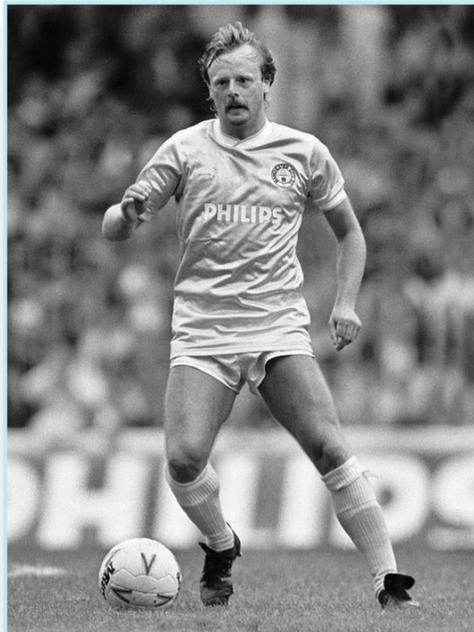
I have said to you many times, you need 2 of these 3 to have a “good game” -
Talking Tackling Technique

Habits: On the Field

- Taking to the Field. When it is time to take the field, take the field positively. Jog on as a team toward your positions. Look sprightly, feel sprightly, and feel energized. Don't walk on slowly, heads down low. This will just reinforce a negative feeling. Talk up your teammates. Think about what coach just said before the start or re-start.
- Listening. If someone is talking, you need to listen. Good players are really good listeners. You have to know what your teammates mean.
- Attitude. Soccer is firstly won or lost on the practice field days before a game, second more importantly in the mind, and thirdly on the field during the 90 minutes. The most important aspect on the field is attitude. You need to think positive. You need to reinforce your teammates positively. You need to praise good work. You should NEVER criticize a teammate. They will NOT have made an error deliberately. They (and you) will make mistakes. If you are manly enough, you acknowledge them and move on quickly. You need to never give up. Your attitude is on show. When you are beaten in a tackle, we were taught to “get right back into it” and recover the ball. It is a good habit to recover quickly and make sure the opponent, who beat you, realizes that you come right back at them before they can exploit the opportunity you gave them by losing the ball in the first place.
- Talking. Talking is a critical part of soccer. Not only to communicate with your teammates, but it also helps to signal to the competition. When you are in space and you call for a ball, even if you don't get the ball, your calling will have made an impact on the defending team. That impact may create space for a better play or more options.
- Talking. Clarity. Be clear what you mean to your partners. If you need the ball in a specific location, let your teammates know – point, nod, or talk.
- Tackling. You have to be committed. It is good practice to “go in” first time with the proper, balanced level of firmness. This is not about being reckless or dangerous, it is about setting expectations. A defender will think twice, next time, if your first tackle was strong, firm, and resolute. Next time they might hesitate – and what would have been a contested ball will now be in your favor.
- Work Rate. Your team is working hard. You will never be faulted if you tried your hardest. But you run the risk of being called out if you “turned up” and didn't try. If you are tired, we have subs – that is what they are for.



- Always thinking and “what if”. Professionals never turn off. Always think about what you can do with the ball? About what you can do without the ball? Who will you pass to? Can he pass to me? Is he still free? Have I created space and opportunity for my teammate?
- Alertness. Don’t ever turn your back on the ball. If your teammate took a hard shot at the ‘keeper, and you are closest to that ‘keeper, follow up right away in case the ball “bobbles” and comes free from the ‘keepers’ hands.
- Substitution. Be alert. Be prepared to go on. If you are on the bench, and it has been 20 minutes since warm up, warm up again to prepare to re-enter the game.
- Time Management. You need to use your brain. If we a leading, we do not need to go out of our way to help the opposition by collecting a loose ball. We do not spring off the field when being substituted. We do not have to rush to take throw-ins, unless there is a clear, CLEAR, chance to score. Equally, if we are behind, we don’t want to lose any time. Think about the situation.
- Constructive Criticism. Never criticize a teammate for a bad play. They very likely know they made a mistake. Always use positive, constructive criticism.



Habits: After the Game

- If we lose. It is far more important to look at your own performance than looking at how the team performed. The team is made up of players – and the team is only as good as the sum of each player’s effort, commitment and work rate. There is no need to complain; coach will not be unhappy with your performance if you tried your hardest. So focus first on your performance.
- Advise. Coach will very likely offer you some team comments as well as individual comments. Every player will have something to improve, even when we win games. Seek that advice. If you don’t get any, ask for it. Try to use the next practice to improve the gap – and show your coach how you applied his advice.
- Feedback. If you feel you have something to offer the team, or coach, in a constructive manner, say it. Engage.

GO Chiefs!