PLAYER QUALITIES MATRIX

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

LIAM SHANNON // EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CAROLINA SOCCER CLUB

The Player Qualities Matrix is a visual aid to demonstrate the complex relationships between all of the necessary attributes of a soccer player. Although the matrix is intended as a representation of all qualities, there are no doubt some missing. This is version 2.0, and it is my intention to keep updating the diagram over time to consistently improve.

UNDERSTANDING THE MATRIX

The qualities recorded are from a combination of the Ajax "TIPS" player evaluation document, and the U.S. Soccer player development curriculum. The two sources were merged, edited and then reproduced.

The colors of the text boxes are as follows: **Technical skills**, as defined by an individual's direct interaction with the ball. "**Soccer IQ**," or tactical understanding. **Physical characteristics**, and **psychological areas**. "**Shooting**" is the one area where two colors are combined. While shooting involves direct interaction with the ball, and is, therefore, a technical skill, the additional stresses of shooting—excitement, worry, decision-making, concentration, etc.—mean that shooting is classified as a joint technical and IQ endeavor.

It is taken for granted that attributes of the same family are, or at least likely could be, connected to one another. Therefore, to aid clarity, relationships within the same families have not been highlighted. It is also recognized that, while every effort was made, there are certainly some areas that should be connected that have not been. As stated, the matrix will remain a work in progress!

Finally, there are six other qualities listed under the diagram: *Practice Mentality, Respect, Social Interaction, Mental Toughness, Sportsmanship and Coachability*. I consider these areas to be unique and, therefore, they have been emphasized differently than everything else. My intention is not to imply a player must possess these six traits in abundance to be at all competent, but rather these qualities must all meet a minimum standard for any player of any age or any ability to be an advantage to a group or team. For example: in an ideal circumstance, a player will always raise the bar in attitude and application at practice. At the very least, a player cannot be a distraction, hindrance or a negative influence at practice. In an ideal circumstance, a player will be extremely respectful, well-mannered, polite and humble. At the very least, a player cannot be disrespectful. In an ideal circumstance, a player will have positive relationships with his or her coach and teammates. At the very least, a player cannot be universally despised by the whole locker room. In an ideal circumstance, a player will never let his or her confidence be affected. At the very least, a player cannot consistently shut-down when faced with adversity and failures. In an ideal circumstance,
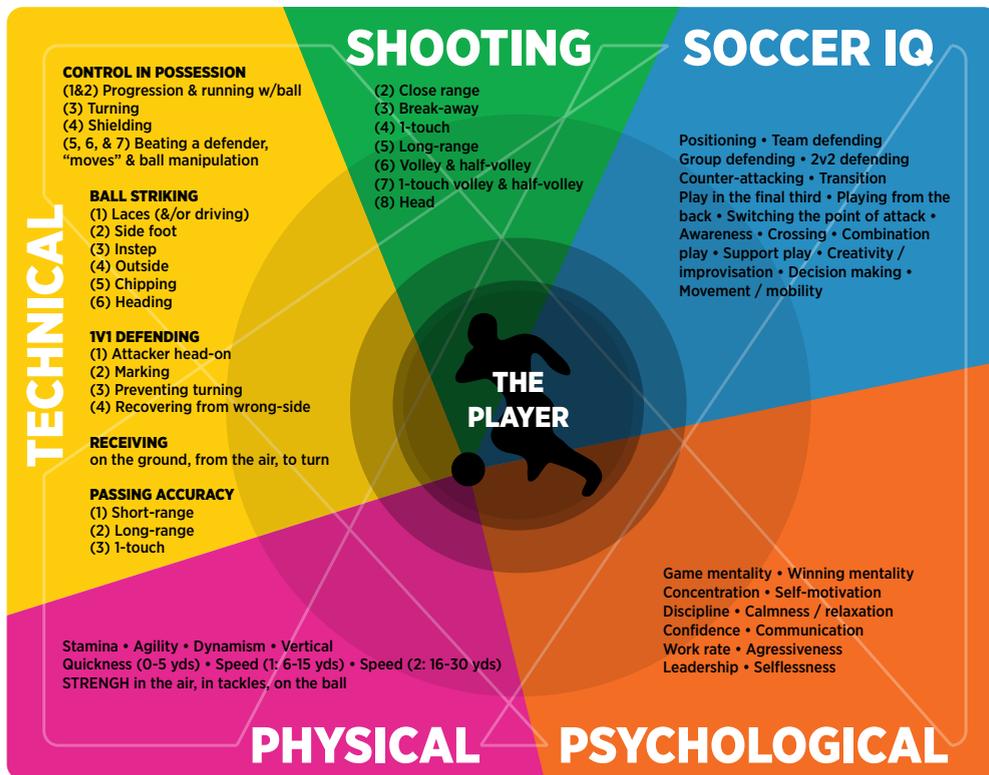
a player will be honorable and principled. At the very least, a player cannot be corrupt and lack all integrity. In an ideal circumstance, a player will actively invite constructive feedback and use it to improve. At the very least, a player cannot be completely arrogant or shut off to any and all suggestions or instructions.

THE INSPIRATION

Ever since I became involved in the game professionally I have heard, and participated in, discussions regarding the most often referred to areas of player development: technical, tactical, physical and psychological. These four areas sometimes take on different names or slightly different tones: "Soccer IQ" or "Insight" (Ajax) instead of "Tactical." "Social," "Psychosocial," or "Personality" (Ajax) instead of "Psychological." The Ajax model actually mixes some areas together: "Speed" is qualified as mental and physical speed. Despite subtleties in vernacular between Ajax, the U.S. curriculum and the common soccer-world, we all seem to be talking about the same things and qualifying them in similar fashions. These differences are somewhat notable, but they have never really interested me much. (Personally, I prefer "Technical," "Soccer IQ," "Physical," and "Psychological.") What has always fascinated me though, and provided me with the desire to create the matrix, are the debates surrounding which of the four groups is the "most" important, and, what specific order each should be taught in. I have never heard anything remotely satisfactory, so I decided to do something practical about it

I believe the most basic problem with the player development debate is that too many people view it as a black and white, linear process instead of a holistic, cooperative organism. I have seen this demonstrated in two ways. First, with sweeping claims such as: "You should only teach technique at the younger ages," "Tactics should only come at U13," "The physical stuff will sort itself out," and "It's all about strength and speed," to name just a few. None of these assertions ever made any sense to me. Take them one by one: "You should only teach technique at the younger ages." Really? (First of all, what technique? There are at least twenty different ones I can think of, but that's a separate issue.) What about coachability and respect? Those are psychological traits. Even at the younger ages they need to be emphasized. What about awareness of surroundings and basic decision-making? Those are IQ traits. They should be encouraged at the younger ages too.

"Tactics should only come at U13." Curiously, why such an arbitrary age? That aside, creativity, or thinking for oneself to fix one's own dilemmas; transition, or applying the mental and physical effort to adapt to the most basic change in circumstance; and switching the point of attack, or realizing your path is blocked and therefore choosing a different one:

TECHNICAL

CONTROL IN POSSESSION
(1&2) Progression & running w/ball
(3) Turning
(4) Shielding
(5, 6, & 7) Beating a defender, "moves" & ball manipulation

BALL STRIKING
(1) Laces (&/or driving)
(2) Side foot
(3) Instep
(4) Outside
(5) Chipping
(6) Heading

1V1 DEFENDING
(1) Attacker head-on
(2) Marking
(3) Preventing turning
(4) Recovering from wrong-side

RECEIVING
on the ground, from the air, to turn

PASSING ACCURACY
(1) Short-range
(2) Long-range
(3) 1-touch

SHOOTING
(2) Close range
(3) Break-away
(4) 1-touch
(5) Long-range
(6) Volley & half-volley
(7) 1-touch volley & half-volley
(8) Head

SOCCER IQ
Positioning • Team defending
Group defending • 2v2 defending
Counter-attacking • Transition
Play in the final third • Playing from the back • Switching the point of attack • Awareness • Crossing • Combination play • Support play • Creativity / improvisation • Decision making • Movement / mobility

THE PLAYER

PSYCHOLOGICAL
Game mentality • Winning mentality
Concentration • Self-motivation
Discipline • Calmness / relaxation
Confidence • Communication
Work rate • Agressiveness
Leadership • Selflessness

PHYSICAL
Stamina • Agility • Dynamism • Vertical
Quickness (0-5 yds) • Speed (1: 6-15 yds) • Speed (2: 16-30 yds)
STRENGH in the air, in tackles, on the ball

PRACTICE MENTALITY • SPORTSMANSHIP • COACHABILITY • SOCIAL INTERACTION • RESPECT • MENTAL TOUGHNESS

think we should encourage a 'winning mentality' at nine years old? Oh, so you think it's okay then to make the same demands of nine-year-olds as you would Premier League players?" Again, no. Just make practice exercises that are competition-based in design and then put into place some light rewards and conse-quences based on results. It is achievable to apply such demands on players while simultaneously running a fun, efficient, developmentally appropriate session.

The truth is a simple one, and one I think the matrix helps to visualize: everything is connected to everything. Yes, one could assert that a specific trait is more valuable than another, both within the same family and between different families. Within the Technical family, receiving on the ground could be said to be more critical than ball striking with the outside of one's foot.

these are all IQ concepts. They are still valid at ages 12, 11 and 10. They are basic and vital thought processes! And what about support play? At its core, support play is taking action in acknowledgement and consideration of teammates. Simple respect and a desire to help are seeds that should be planted at a young age.

"The physical stuff will sort itself out." I think we all know that you cannot make someone who is five foot ten into someone who is six foot four, or that anyone can be taught the speed—but can be taught the touch—of Usain Bolt. But to ignore speed, agility, strength and stamina with the excuse of "nature will take its course" is weak and lazy. And finally, the opposite line: "It is all about strength and speed." While the physical aspect of soccer cannot be overlooked, the actions that must be taken to gain physical superiority are Psychological traits like work ethic, practice mentality and discipline. And the situations they need to be employed in are Technical situations such as running with the ball or IQ scenarios such as mobility or group defending.

The second type of experience I have encountered with debate on the player development process is blanket dismissiveness of a more inter-connected approach, usually rationalized through over-simplification and misinterpretation. "You want to teach decision-making at seven years old? Oh, so you want to set up an 11v11 playing-from-the-back exercise then? Or a high-pressure, two-touch combination-play session?" No. That is not it. In wanting to emphasize good decision-making at seven years old, for example, a coach only needs to question, and make the player question, simple things like "Is it a better idea to dribble, shoot or pass in X situation?" And then guide the player toward an intelligent line of analysis. A coach can do this within a practice on any age-appropriate subject. "You

(And we can therefore argue the former should be taught before the latter.) Similarly, between families: decision-making (IQ) is arguably more essential than strength in the air (Physical).

However, wholesale assertions that prioritize an entire family over another, such as "being technical,"—whatever that means—is more important than possessing an IQ is to essen-tially claim that quality in control of the ball is more meaningful than having any active brain function. Or, put differently, you want a player who is a "beautiful fool." Similarly, a sweeping claim of "Soccer IQ is more important than Physical quality" is also incorrect. It is of no use being a tactical genius if one cannot run without falling over. If simply stating "Physical is more important than Psychological," I would contend that allowing a modern-day Hercules onto one's team, but one who is selfish, unethical and disrespectful, is not an overall benefit. And to come full circle: being a pure and righteous individual is not of much use if one cannot kick a ball 10 yards in a straight line, so saying "Personality is more important than technique," is clearly improper too.

Taking a step back and assessing the big-picture is critical. A beautiful fool is just as impractical as an uncoordinated genius, just as an amoral super-athlete is as useless as someone with the morality, but also the soccer ability, of Mother Theresa. More significantly we have to question whether it is responsi-ble, or even ethical, to develop such uncompromising players, and humans, through such terribly linear thoughts and actions. I do not believe so. I believe it is a coach's responsibility, and the coaching community's obligation, to respect the process of development and to accept and act upon the truth that everything is connected, and a sensible, holistic approach needs to be taken to education. ■