

How To Assess Soccer Players Without Skill Tests.
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This article was originally created for presentation at the 1999 USYSA Workshop in Chicago. The piece was revised and expanded in December 2000.

Evaluating soccer players can be a challenging process, particularly when the criteria used for evaluation are not based on the demands of the game. Soccer is a very fluid game when it is performed well; to play at speed, players must have skill and vision and tactical insight. However, with novice and experienced coaches alike, there is a tendency to look at soccer as a series of discrete skills or actions, separate from the game as a whole. This can lead to the development of evaluation criteria that are based more on “scores” than “performance.” While a deep knowledge of the discrete components that comprise the game of soccer is important, and, in fact, serves as one marker that separates the more experienced coach from the novice, there is an inherent danger in thinking about the game in discrete terms when evaluating players. This is particularly true in try-out situations when “skill tests” are seen as more objective and often utilized to protect inexperienced coaches from unpopular decisions. Let’s take a look at passing as an example of the folly and futility of individual skill testing for the purpose of selecting players for teams.

A common skill test for passing is to count how many times the ball is exchanged between two players in 60 seconds using the inside of the foot. In soccer games, the purpose of passing is to score goals, to take opponents out of the game, or to keep possession of the ball. There are six surfaces of the foot that can be used to pass the ball (inside, outside, heel, toe, instep and sole) and the ball can be passed using a variety of spins, speeds and trajectories. If we separate the tactical aspects of play (when and why do I pass there?) from the technical aspects (what surface and texture is required?), the basic elements of the game are decoupled and we are left with activities that involve technical repetition without tactical context. In addition, when we choose to test passing skills with a particular surface, it is often at the expense of the others. This can send the message to players that the other surfaces are either less important, not recommended, or not to be considered. Think about coaches who discourage, and would certainly never test for, passing with the toe, and then consider all the ways the toe can be used as a viable option in problem solving! To take this to the extreme, if we decide to be fair and test all six surfaces, how long will this process take and what time will be left for assessing all the other technical, tactical and physical aspects that constitute the elements of play?

Looking from a different perspective, think of practicing passing with one surface as similar to learning to strike just one key on a keyboard. We may become good at striking “G,” but it doesn’t make us think about how to find “G” in the context of creating a complete sentence, or how “G” is situated in relation to the other keys. Ironically, practicing only one technique in isolation is actually reinforcing for coaches because players do improve their ability to perform that particular action. However, the downside to predictable technical repetition in young players is that those who learn the game in less predictable ways are more likely to develop a deeper understanding of how to adapt their range of techniques to solve novel tactical problems; in short, they become more skilful! While street soccer may be a thing of the past, think no further than the upbringing of the average NBA player to form an appreciation of its lost value. Creative, skillful players develop in response to an environment where techniques and tactical awareness develop in unpredictable ways “together” though hours of unstructured free play.

So how does this relate to try-outs? My premise is that quantitative (numerical) measures of ability do not work very well in evaluating soccer players. Timed sprints, kicks against a wall, kicking for distance, number of Coerver’s in a minute, and various competitions, such as 1v1 Combat, are all examples of activities that have been used to assess whether players can play soccer or not. However, knowing that Suzie can sprint 50 yards in 8 seconds, juggle 5 times with her right foot, kick 25.5 yards with her left foot, and run through a line of cones in 12 seconds tells us very little about Suzie’s ability as a problem-solver under pressure. For that, we need to watch her play soccer and evaluate how her technique impacts her decision-making.

While the task of watching and assessing decision-making within a live game can be quite difficult for the average parent-coach, the following criteria form the basis of a realistic playing evaluation. Assessing players’ strengths and weaknesses in an authentic setting not only provides information on which players can actually “play” soccer, but also allows coaches the opportunity to target for remediation those areas that are observed to be absent or a hindrance to good performance. Consider how realistic it would be to tell a

parent that their child is on the “B” or “C” team because they don’t yet understand how to create space, or they can’t keep possession of the ball when under pressure, or their tactical understanding does not allow them to play in combination with others, or that they simply take too many touches and play too slowly. Contrast that message with the information that their child is on the “B” or “C” team because they can’t run fast enough, juggle well enough, dribble through a line of cones under control, or because they finished bottom of a competitive heading ladder. In reality, the differences between the scores of young players may be one or two juggles or one or two seconds, or one or two feet. We must ask if those differences really tell us anything of substance about that person as a soccer player?

The suggested games for observing players under the age of ten are 2v2, 2v2+1, 3v3, 3v3+1, 4v4, and 5v5. While 5v5 is the best option to assess 9 and 10 year-olds, younger or very inexperienced children might find these numbers too complicated. For players older than ten, games of 8v8 and 11v11 should be used to complement games of 5v5. The smaller-sided games can be played to a line (dribble over the line in control to score), to a target player on the end line (pass to the target player to score / use the other team’s target as a support player), or to a goal (with or without goalkeepers). Eight versus eight and 11v11 should always be played to goals and with goalkeepers. The field sizes will vary, but generally 2v2 is played on a field of 15x25 yards, 3v3 on a field of 20x30 yards, 4v4 on a field of 25x40 yards, and 5v5 on a field of 30x40 yards. The 8v8 field is 50x70 yards.

Here are the criteria used for evaluation.

Because players under the age of 10 have not developed a sense of group tactics, the following criteria deal with individual technical and tactical issues.

1. Does the player understand which goal to attack and which to defend? Have they established a sense of soccer DIRECTION?
2. Does the player try to CONTROL THE BALL when it comes to them, or do they look to kick it away?
3. Is the player COMFORTABLE WHEN DRIBBLING the ball? Does the player try to keep the ball close to their body?
4. Does the player try to use a VARIETY OF SURFACES when turning and running with the ball?
5. Is the player TWO FOOTED?
6. Does the player ATTACK OPEN SPACE when they have time and space to dribble the ball forward?
7. Does the player recognize when to DRIBBLE AWAY FROM PRESSURE? Does the player have the spatial awareness to perceive pressure and move into an open space with the ball?
8. Given time and space, does the player have the technical skills TO BEAT AN OPPONENT and maintain possession?
9. Does the player MOVE INTO OPEN SPACES to receive passes? Does the player stand behind other players or do they perceive open space and move away from the crowd?
10. Does the player naturally MOVE WITH THE GAME, or do they kick the ball and stand still?
11. Does the player SCORE GOALS? Does the player naturally look to score goals and do they have the vision and technique to score by design?
12. Does the player try to RECOVER THE BALL when the other team has possession?

In addition to the elements used to assess players under the age of ten, the following criteria should also be used to assess players older than ten.

1. Does the player understand how to SPREAD OUT? Where should the player move to give the team a playing shape and create space between the defenders? Does the team have players on either side of the field and in the front and in the back?
2. Does the player understand how to CREATE SPACE TO RECEIVE A PASS? Does the player move to help the passer make a connection? This may involve losing a defender to create space or simply demonstrating an awareness of possible passing lanes.
3. Does the player understand when to CREATE SPACE AT THE RIGHT MOMENT to receive a pass? Does the player's movement help the passer? Do they run into space before the ball can be played, or do they run into space too late and the passing lane disappears?
4. Does the player understand when to SUPPORT A TEAMMATE AND WHEN TO STRETCH THE OTHER TEAM? Does the player understand when it is time to take a defender away from the area of the ball because other teammates are in better supporting positions? Does the player understand when to receive passes to feet in front of their defender and when to receive passes into space behind their defender? Does the player's choice of supporting positions allow the team to maintain possession?
5. Is the player MOBILE within the game? Does the player cover a lot of ground in a purposeful way? Does the player only move when the ball is close to them? Does the player move in anticipation of combining with teammates?
6. Does the player have a high TRANSITION WORK-RATE? Does the player expend much effort? In particular, does the player transition quickly from attack to defense and from defense to attack?
7. Does the player have VISION for the game? Does the player turn their head or open their body before they get the ball to help see teammates? Does the player look for teammates when in possession or does their poor skill level leave them fighting to control the ball? Is the player looking for opportunities to score goals or to quickly pass to teammates in more advanced positions?
8. SPEED OF PLAY and DECISION MAKING. Does the player understand when it is time to possess the ball by playing forward, sideways or backward? Do they understand when it is time to pass, dribble or shoot? Do they read the position and movement of teammates and defenders and constantly adjust their own positions? How many touches do they need to pass, control, dribble or shoot?
9. INDIVIDUAL DEFENDING SKILLS. How well does the player defend against their immediate opponent? Do they look to intercept passes? Do they understand how to close down their opponent and remain balanced? Do they demonstrate controlled aggression when tackling for the ball? Do they deny their opponent space to turn? Do they position themselves to channel their opponent away from dangerous areas? Do they position themselves to deny forward passes when in the middle of the field? Do they understand how to use offside space?
10. GROUP DEFENDING SKILLS. Does the player help teammates to defend? Do they understand how to cover teammates? Do they understand how to defend passing lanes? Do they follow opponents running into dangerous supporting positions? Do they understand how to play within a zone?

11. PHYSICAL QUALITIES. Do they help the team because of individual qualities, such as speed and size, or because they have neat skills and a "feel" for soccer? In the long run, will their existing range of techniques help them become a competent soccer player, despite their current size? In the long run, will their physical qualities and athleticism compensate for less-than-polished skills? Do they have the endurance to play soccer for extended periods without taking long rests or asking for a substitution? Are they agile and balanced, or cumbersome in their movements?
12. PSYCHOLOGICAL QUALITIES. Are they competitive? Are they coachable? Are they focused and intrinsically motivated? Are they responsible? Are they a positive or negative influence on teammates? Do they view improvement or winning as more important? What are their goals for soccer and where do they want to be in 5 or 10 years? Do they practice their skills alone? Do they have other talents and interests in life?

Soccer is a game of decisions influenced by vision and technique. The most gifted technical player at the girls ODP regional camp in 1998 was quite stunning with the ball on the practice field. With her green soccer shoes and smooth technique, she was easy to identify; unfortunately, she was a non-entity during the games because she could not find her moments to get involved, she played too slowly, she was immobile, and she made very poor decisions. This, sadly, was an example of someone who had apparently grown up juggling and practicing dribbling skills at the expense of learning to play the game. Without question, she would have been the #1 ranked player at camp had the team been selected on skill tests. While technical players are obviously important at the higher levels, young players must learn to solve the problems of small-sided games as they develop their skill level, not afterwards. Learning to assess individuals on the basis of their performance in live games is an important step towards helping coaches recognize true soccer talent; an important step towards picking teams based on realistic soccer criteria; and an important step towards helping coaches develop an individual focus for the seasons' practices. Soccer has many, many elements that contribute to superior performance and this interrelationship cannot be overlooked when assessing players' ability.