

The Talent without the Mindset

This article is a summary of a presentation made at the 2008 NSCAA Convention in Baltimore.

The history of soccer is littered with examples of teen-age prodigies who failed to fulfill their potential, while others who once shared the same hype went on to become global superstars.

For every Wayne Rooney or Steven Gerrard, there are dozens of players with prodigious talent that barely break through into the professional game, let alone rank among the world's elite.

An objective approach to managing the mental development of aspiring soccer players is very much a gray area. However, two forward-thinking pioneers at the academy of Blackburn Rovers have spent the past three years creating a model to ensure that the club's scholars maximize their potential by developing their mental approach to the game.

Steve Nickson and Tony Faulkner have gathered insights from a wide range of sources – from academics at Stanford University to experts in graphology – to establish ways of profiling and managing the mental development of talented teenagers at their academy.

Their primary focus has been to help players develop the mental capacity to deal with setbacks in their careers and for the club's coaches to be aware of the specific mental traits players need to cultivate.

The interest generated by their findings has been such that the pair was invited to present their model to a psychology academics in London and to an expert at the Lawn Tennis Association.

Following that presentation, they also came to Baltimore to address members of the National Soccer Coaches Association of America, following in the footsteps of influential figures in the game including Chelsea chief scout Frank Arnesen and former German head coach Juergen Klinsmann.

Faulkner, who is pursuing a degree in psychology as well as being the head of the academy's medical department, believes their research has enabled them to utilize an objective, professional approach to mental training.

"The aim of developing this model was to enable us to be far more objective in our assessment of a player," explained Faulkner. "In the past, where our industry has been much more subjective, making comments based on intuition and gut

"The traits required to be a soccer player are the same as in sport, as in business, as in education," he said. "We refer to them as 'the mental traits needed for human excellence.' You need these characteristics and...the ability to develop them to fulfill your potential."

The duo are developing a "growth mindset" culture within the Blackburn Academy, in contrast to a "fixed mindset" often found in talented youngsters.

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feeling, we now have objective analysis and statistics which will support what we are saying.

"We can then monitor, assess and show how we are moving players along a continuum," Faulkner added. "You will not only see that theoretically, but you will see that in their behavior, which will then become habit which effects their performance, which at the end of the day is what we are all after."

Nickson, the academy's recruitment coordinator, also notes that to succeed in soccer, young players must possess the same human traits as seen in other industries.

"I think to achieve success, whether it be as a professional footballer or in any other walk of life, you need certain characteristics to get you through periods of difficulty in your life," Nickson said. "The challenge is, can you overcome the obstacles and develop as a person?"

most exclusively on their natural talent to deal with setbacks in their careers. They believe that talent on its own will help them through setbacks.

But players born with talent have very little experience facing obstacles or challenges. As a result, they often view these roadblocks as threats. When things get tough, they quit very easily and avoid hard work.

Players who adopt a growth mindset recognize that their abilities are going to develop over time. They view their own personal development as a path of opportunity and success, motivating them to do better. When they encounter a problem, they see it as a challenge to push themselves further.

To identify character traits, Blackburn profiles every player in the club's academy, scoring them based on criteria such as constructive evaluation, mental toughness, mindset, language and behavior.

After evaluating their scores, the club can identify areas where each player is weak mentally and use a range of skills training to develop their physiological traits.

Nickson believes that compared with other academies in the United Kingdom, Blackburn is at the cutting edge not only in profiling players, but also in having a structure to manage their mental development.

"In terms of having a research model in place that has professional credibility, there is no one doing it among academies in the UK, but we know the NFL does something very similar," he explained.

"There are clubs who use psychometric testing, but the big thing we believe in is that when you profile, the second phase of addressing and managing the issue is just as important. Therefore, you must develop your own personal tools to help the players develop.

"I don't think I have come across any coach in soccer during my 15 years in the game who does not believe the mind and the ability to be mentally tough is not important – in fact, they all think this is very, very important. But instead of just having a vague term based on their past experiences, the model underpins what these various things are – mental toughness, mindset, constructive evaluation and so on.

"It has been based upon the ideals and knowledge of leading experts in the field from all over the world. Instead of everyone here being an amateur psychologist, we have something in place that puts all the theory into action and can be managed on a day-to-day basis. This is something far more tangible than coaches referring to vague phrases such as 'mentally strong.' What is mentally strong, what does it mean?"

The constructive evaluation Faulkner refers to is a process in which players, through a debriefing of their performance, learn via an objective assessment designed to take them to the next level. This type of honest evaluation helps bring the opinions of the player and the coach closer together. It also forces players to face reality and not delude themselves that they are progressing when they actually have had a poor performance and have room to improve.

It is an area of mental training that has been championed by Yehuda Shinar, who devised "The Winning Model," used successfully by Sir Clive Woodward during England's 2003 Rugby World Cup

triumph. He is one of the experts that has been working with the Blackburn Academy. He spent nine months interacting with the club's youngsters.

He highlights a number of athletes who have adopted the growth mentality successfully. He recalls seeing tennis player Andre Agassi a few years ago work on "a very specific serve for over two and a half hours" as he strove for perfection before the Paris Masters event.

To manage mental toughness, the club has split its management into four specific areas: commitment, control, challenge and confidence.

They also undertake a VO₂ Max test; players are put on the treadmill with a heart monitor and are asked to run until they reach their peak heart rate and stop when they physically cannot continue.

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A common trait of fixed mentality players is that they give up easily and do not get anywhere near their peak heart rate.

Players who score low on various aspects of mental toughness also show lack of emotional control on and off the pitch, which can inhibit their development and performance. Faulkner believes that to help this type of player, a coach's language and behavior are critical. For that reason, he is adamant that the model installed at Blackburn is there to develop the coach as much as the player.

"If the coach has a deeper understanding of where the player is in their mental development, it increases the possibilities for the coach getting best out of that particular player and team," he noted. "Through understanding how a player perceives his or her view of the world, a coach can cleverly gain information from the individual. The language portrayed by the coach to players can help them fulfill their ability. This comes with understanding how to get the best

out of every player, whether they are proactive and use their own initiative in wanting to improve, or reactive to the guidance of the coach.

"Coaches can use specific approaches of encouragement through using the player's language," Faulkner said, "whether it is getting a player into the gym, facing up to areas of their games they must improve and so on. They can focus the mindset of the player to what they can achieve in their careers and help them face up to an indifferent performance through honest constructive self-evaluation. Then by using as an example one of the various techniques called mental imagery, the coach can help the player predict potential future situations, and work at ways how to deal with the negative situations they may encounter. However, they must not become over-reli-

ant on the guidance of the coach and the coach must make sure the player, with guidance, eventually becomes self-reliant."

With recent media coverage focusing on the lack of young English players breaking through from Premier League academies into their first teams, senior officials and pundits within the game have put forth various opinions. These range from the importance of a national academy to the introduction of a quota system.

Nickson believes that club academies should ensure that every player has the opportunity to maximize their personal psychological potential; he believes the model Blackburn has put in place can help every player achieve this goal.

"We are talking about maximizing potential, trying to get someone to get near their potential," Nickson said. "It is widely accepted not only in soccer, but also in other sports and professions, that being successful is not just about skill and talent. Attitude is just as important. What we are trying to do is define what

exactly attitude is off the back of this research. By addressing that, you are giving them an edge and understanding to deal with the inevitable setbacks and difficulties they are going to face. By no means are we saying that individuals have not succeeded from adopting a fixed mindset; however, if they had possessed that growth mindset, there is that possibility that they possibly could have sustained their stay at the top of their profession longer."

Despite the pair's embrace of mental skills ideals, both are aware that a player's mental development is merely an aid, albeit a very important one, in a player's physical, technical and tactical development.

In the scenario of a player being brought into the club on trial and scoring poorly on their profile, Nickson, as recruitment coordinator, would not make a final decision based solely on that result.

"I think the profile and the mental skills trait is an aid and only a part of the other types of physical, technical and tactical profiles that we do," he stressed. "We would not dream of saying that 'this is where he is in his stage of his mental development – we are not going to bother with him.' That would be dismissive. It just alerts us where the player is at this moment in time so we can start working with him or her. If someone has not come

out of the profiling positively, you have to be aware that this person may have issues, whatever they may be, and a lot of time and effort is going to go into development to move him or her forward."

confident that their approach to mental development will evolve as they improve their own understanding of the field and as the academy absorbs other forward-thinking practices.

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"It is not the tool to say yes or no," Faulkner agreed. "It is a tool to make us aware of where they are mentally. What will be interesting as time goes by as a result of our findings is you may come across certain so-called talented players who regularly score very low. Therefore, if they continue to fail to maximize their potential you could be in a position to turn around and say, no we are not going to take them, but the decision would be based on a couple of years in the academy and not a short-term assessment."

Looking to the future, Falkner is

"I would like to think we are of a growth mindset ourselves, so purely by that nature we want to learn, develop and get better all the time," he said. "If there is an area of the model which evolves, which I am sure it will because the people and environment around us evolve, I am sure we will pick up various trends that we can adapt and use if need be. And I am sure that over time, through our expert contacts we will pick up new techniques which will help us even more as we strive to ensure all our youngsters move towards their full potential." 🏆

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