

What A College Coach Looks For In A Player

(Anson Dorrance)

I'm asked this question all the time: "What do you look for in a player?" It is almost an impossible question to answer. If I answer it in one way, I would be eliminating a whole group of players of interest to me.

The way I answer the question is by telling the story about a Supreme Court Judge in Southern California who was asked to define pornography. He had to write a statute and he took twelve months trying to sort out an appropriate definition of pornography. After a whole year, this very intelligent man could not write the statute. So they asked him, "How you know what pornography is?" He said, "I know it when I see it."

It's basically the same with players. I can tell you a player needs certain technical, tactical, physical, and psychological levels, and yet I can find a player who has won either a world championship or gold medal who doesn't have a dimension that I'm saying you require. What you need is some kind of balance.

But rest assured, it's critical to be extraordinary in at least one area. Then you will have an impact. If you have world-class speed, you can have an impact. If you can out-head everybody in the world but can trap a ball farther than you can kick it, you can have an impact. If you are a psychological rock but have no tactical awareness, you can have an impact.

The great players, obviously, are extraordinary in more than one area, and the greatest players are extraordinary in all areas. It's based on a mix of all these different qualities. I would say the most important of all these is your psychological strength, because the quality that separates winners is the ability to constantly reach down to find something deep inside them to make the commitment other people are not willing to make. With that in mind, here are the four dimensions that I believe are necessary.

Psychological

This is the capacity to be able to deal with all kinds of adversity. It is also the capacity to be so hard that in your duels with opposing players, you are not intimidated. In great duels, there are defining moments. There is the moment when you get a sense of the other person's hardness. It may be a physical risk issue or a fitness issue.

When you are competing, you measure your capacity to take physical risks, your capacity to push through pain threshold, and your capacity to not back down psychologically from someone. Those defining moments are constant in contact sports. If two players are running for the same ball, the one with the weaker psychological dimension is going to time it so she gets to the ball late. In other words, she is going to time it so she misses the confrontation with the other player. That's the defining moment of that duel -- who is going to slow down and who isn't.

Physical

A lot of this is inherited -- your quickness, your speed, your agility, and your strength. But some of it can be developed. You can improve your quickness, your endurance, and to a certain extent, you can develop speed. The person who fills the physical dimension is the one who has an intelligent and consistent work ethic to improve all the physical qualities. The reason I say "intelligent" is that most people don't have the understanding that all these things work against each other.

For instance, the process of developing speed actually retards agility. If you are developing a good cardiovascular base, it actually hurts your speed development. If you are running 20 or 30 minutes over miles and miles, it actually detracts from your capacity to sprint. You need to develop a balance of all these qualities.

Technical

Speed of play is the critical element in a player's technical development. Speed of play is your ability to do things quickly with a soccer ball. A four-year-old can trap a ball. But this four-year-old can't trap a ball on a full run when another player is trying to cut him/her off at the kneecaps.

As you go from one level to the next technically, you are required to be able to do things so much faster -- shoot under pressure, do things with the ball without time and space, and do things with one touch, more efficiently. That's the ascension of your tactical growth.

Tactical

The tactical requirement actually has two parts. The first is being able to recognize what is happening on the field. The second is being able to make a decision that will help your team the most and hurt the other team the most. So your tactical requirements are having the awareness as to what is going on in the game by seeing it, then having the decision-making process to sort out what's best. And what is best is going to be determined by a lot of different factors -- what third of the field you're on, your match-up, time and space, and whether or not you have possession, etc.