

Player Development Starts at the Socks

Have you ever watched the best players in the world and wondered: how did they do that? They perform a brilliant pass, finding a player in the open while being under extreme pressure. Or they score a brilliant goal and it seemed as if the player knew where everything and everyone was and then made the right decision under pressure. It may be a quick dribble into a space that didn't even seem to be there but suddenly appeared.

The best players seem to have that sixth sense. Although to some it may come naturally, I do believe that to a large extent, it can be improved in all players. It takes mental perception. What do I mean by that? The ability of a player to quickly assess who is around them and which way they are moving in relation to themselves. Training this is not easy and occurs with repetition and success over a long period of time. To become good, the brain has to make certain decisions automatically and correctly. It's a bit like a baby learning how to put food in its mouth.



Finding the mouth involves visual, mental, and muscular perception requiring repetitive practice with success.

At first, it takes time to properly grasp the food and then there is a challenge in co-ordinating the hand movement to actually find the mouth. With repetition we get really good at this. So good that we can do it with our eyes closed. The brain is well adapted to learning. But the training is done every day.

The ability to teach a player to make certain things instinctive comes with knowing what is around them. Unfortunately, in game situations there are opponents who want to make life difficult for them. They want the ball. In order to beat them or find a teammate to pass to, a player must make decisions quickly. The player must quickly process information that his/her eyes see, and then make a quick decision as to what to do next. The brain has to make these decisions in a matter of milliseconds because it has to send signals back to its muscles on what to do with every step or muscle movement. To complicate matters, things change every second as teammates, opponents, and the ball are all in motion.

Follow me here.

In soccer, in most cases the ball is on the ground. The player has to make some decisions and in making these decisions, he/she has to look at the ball to see where it is. In that split second that the player is looking at the ball, the brain has to take mental pictures, process them, and spit out a decision on what to do next. Visual perception of what's going on here is key. Split seconds are critical. Quite often, the player is under so much pressure from opponents while also trying to read the motion of the ball (is it spinning? etc). In order to make a decision the brain will have to make a certain amount of assumptions based on what the eyes see. Based on these guesses, the brain gives back a response to its muscles and tells them what to do.

If the guesses are wrong then there is less chance of success. If the guesses are correct the chance of success is better. Achieving success is vital in successful training. For example, if you have to guess a number between one and three or a number between one and 10, then you will obviously make more correct decisions when guessing a number with less chances of error. (in this example picking a number between one and three)

In analysing player development over a number of years, the player who consistently makes more correct decisions will get to know what it “feels like” to be correct and then use the correct skill more often. This will result in the brain making more correct decisions on which skill to use in each situation. The skill will become more instinctive if successful over years. The player who uses a certain skill under certain conditions and does it successfully more often will eventually start to become natural at that skill in the right situation. Repetition and getting the “feeling” of getting it right is key to training the brain. That player will not even be able to explain what he/she may be doing because the brain just does it.

**Repetition and getting the “feeling” of getting
it right is the key to training the brain**

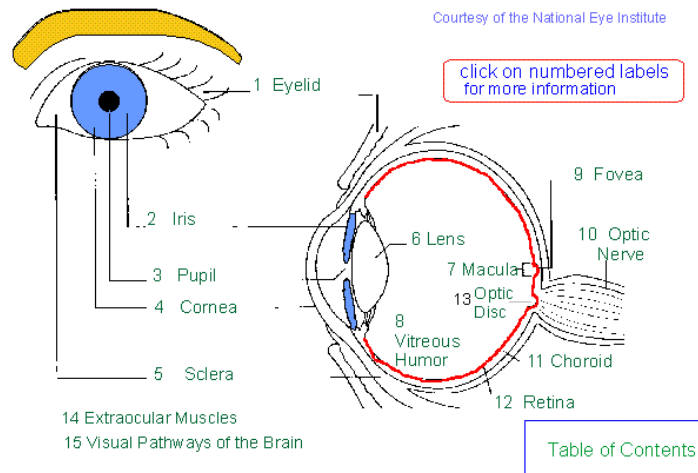
But if a player is put into a condition where the chance of getting those assumptions correct are so rare that they will not get the “feeling” of doing it right enough times then the brain cannot learn to instinctively make the right decisions consistently.

Now, for the first 5 years of their soccer playing careers, many soccer players in North America are making too many poor decisions because, for the most part, they do not play the game enough everyday. Most play once a week and train once a week. Although that’s not enough, the clubs cannot provide more games during a season mainly due to the lack of fields and the short season. For the first 5 years, the bulk of the players are playing at the recreational or house league level. Hopefully, the coaches of these kids will make their players enjoy the game so much that their players will look to play with their friends in the park between games. Unfortunately this is not happening enough in Canada and the US. In many cases, house league, or recreational team coaches are failing to inspire players to practice on their own.

But in some clubs across Canada and the US, player development is being stifled by a simple lack of understanding of human perception and cognitive learning. In those clubs, while children are playing the game in huge numbers, they are not making enough correct decisions to train the brain to become better. When a child is 5, 6 or even 9 and 10, they are just learning and they are having enough challenges, under no pressure at all, to pass a ball, dribble it or shoot it. Take them in a game situation and what do you find? When a player gets the ball, there are lots of players around them. They have very little time and room to make a decision. Also, their heads and eyes are focused on the ball.

When a player has the ball in a game, he/she is looking at the ball and his/her brain must make a decision based on what the eyes see in a split second. So what does a house league or recreational league players’ eyes see and how does the brain process the information so that the correct response is elicited? Without complicating things too much, the eye sees things through the pupil with the images appearing in the back of the eyeball.

**“Which black socks and black shorts belong to my
team and which belong to my opponents?”**



The eye

That's called the retina. From there, signals go through the optic nerve into the brain and specifically to the visual cortex. In that portion of the brain, the information is processed and based on what it sees, the brain sends back signals to the rest of the body to react to each situation. In many cases, the response is instinctive based on past experience, similar to the baby learning how to find it's mouth. With enough correct guesses, the baby will eventually train its muscles to know where his/her mouth is. But the key to getting really good at something is to be successful and in soccer and many other sports where motion is involved, the player has many more variables in finding the correct response to each circumstance. It goes through an extensive process, which involves an executive control process to process this information. The brain does not always give it's muscles back the correct response because it has to make a certain amount of guesses or assumptions on what's going on in each split second of the game. It also has to predict what's going to happen in the future.

Bringing it back down to the simple level, when a player has the ball he/she sees lots of feet and primarily socks and shorts. It catches some shirts. Now the brain has to make a decision and the question the brain has to decipher and ask is, which socks and shorts belong to my team and which belong to my opponents? In fact, which belong to the referees?

How can the brain of a young child, even an adult for that matter, make the right decisions on a more consistent basis if it doesn't know who's socks and shorts belong to his/her team? They can't because in many house leagues or recreational leagues across North America everyone is wearing the same coloured socks and shorts. It will take an extra split second for the brain to figure out whose black socks and black shorts go with the blue shirts and whose black socks and black shorts belong to the red team?



In many clubs, all players wear the same colour socks and shorts.

Since the brain needs more time, which it does not have in soccer, the brain will make more errors and the player on the ball will quite often make the wrong decision because there is more chance of errors in what the brain is processing. It is a bit like picking a number between one and 10 instead of between one and 3. Therefore many young Canadian and American players make more wrong decisions in their earlier years simply due to the colour of the socks.

If the clubs were to purchase different colour socks for each team, then the young brain would be able to process information more accurately and make more correct assumptions. It does so by reading the motion of all the players around them better. This would help give them the “feeling” of making the right decisions more often in a game. This is vital in training the brain to be able to read the game better and perform the correct skills more instinctively.

Manufacturers try and save production costs by convincing clubs to give all teams the same coloured socks and shorts. Uniform suppliers save money because they will need to carry less inventory of coloured socks and take less time to package teams together. Clubs do save some administration headaches in case they have to exchange players to balance teams. The clubs are sold on this convenience factor at the expense of helping the cognitive development of their players at an early age. If clubs are committed to player development then making sure each team wears different coloured socks should be their first order of business. Many clubs are now establishing a paid head coach program, but not considering this issue would contradict their goals of player development.

This seemingly small point is much more important than one would think especially for our youth players and something that is so simple to correct. Any player development model must make it mandatory for clubs to issue different coloured socks to our youngest players

In the club I coach, all 3,000 house league or recreational league players wear the same coloured socks and shorts. This year, my under 12 boys house league team started the year with 4 straight losses. I tried to teach them to pass the ball and look for space and then find each other to pass to, etc etc.. After working on this in practice I noticed that in a game situation, where there is more pressure, the kids were making too many poor decisions. So I went out and purchased a set of bright yellow socks for all my kids and did not lose another game for the rest of the regular season going 10 games without another loss. Maybe it was the socks, or maybe it was psychological. That’s another topic altogether.

My recommendation to clubs is to act immediately!

For Canadian and American youth players, lets get started on the right foot. My recommendation to clubs that run house league (recreational) programs is to look at purchasing different coloured socks for each team **immediately** if not already doing so. Not doing so would suggest the club is not interested in player development but rather in saving a little extra administrative work. The earlier our youth start training the brain the better it will be for the future. Socks would be more important than shorts. It will help player development in Canada and the US and besides, make my home videos of my kids' games much more colourful too!

Thanks for Reading

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