



## SOCCER PLAYER EVALUATION: A STARTING POINT

Compiled by: Dave Gosselin, Director of Coaching, Jerry Beranek, LSC Board Member, Darren Mehl, LSC Board Member,

*"People do what you inspect, not what you expect."* Greg Gatz: UNC strength and conditioning coach

*"You can't improve what you can't measure."* Doug Williamson: NSCAA National Coaching Staff

Dr. Ron Quinn, Head Women's Soccer Coach Xavier University, has pointed out, "we must embrace the viewpoint that growth is a process. Players do not develop in just one season; it takes several years." Two key questions that all coaches should consistently ask are, how do we promote the growth process and how do we know when improvement occurs? To help address these questions, it is useful to have some criteria against which players can be evaluated. For novice and experienced coaches alike, there is a tendency to use evaluation criteria that are based more on "scores" and "game results" than "performance" and "improvement." Evaluation criteria based on "scores" and "results" focus only on the outcome, which often times is out of the control of the individual player or coach. In contrast, improved performance is controlled by the individual player, which, in turn, can be strongly influenced by a positive, constructive practice environment that focuses on player development.

Evaluating soccer players is a challenging process for coaches at all levels because an individual's soccer performance is influenced by complex interrelationships between technical ability and tactical awareness among other factors including psychological and emotional characteristics. Because of these complex interrelationships, the evaluation of a player's ability needs to be done in the context of game-like situations. Learning to assess individual players on the basis of their performance in live games is an important step towards developing realistic player and team improvement goals.

We have created two grids, one for players older and one for younger than 10 years of age. These provide age-appropriate, performance-based, evaluation criteria that can be used to assess players' strengths and weaknesses in an authentic setting. The 10-and-under grid focuses primarily on technical skills because these players generally do not have the capacity for abstract thinking, which is required for tactical instruction. However, coaches should be looking for the development of a player's ability to think about space and where to go next as emerging characteristics in the older players of this age group. The 11-and-older grid focuses on both technical and tactical aspects of player development because players enter into the dawn of tactical awareness and this continues to grow and develop through out their teen years. The criteria for the grids are based on the State, Regional, and National Diploma Curriculum from the National Soccer Coaches Association of America.

To create the authentic environment with in which to evaluate players, it is suggested that small-sided games be used for observing players under the age of ten that include 2 v 2, 2 v 2 + 1, 3 v 3, 3 v 3 + 1, 4 v 4, and 5 v 5. While 5 v 5 is the best option to assess 9 and 10 year-olds, younger or very inexperienced children might find these numbers too complicated. The small-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). The field sizes will vary, but generally 2 v 2 is played on a field of 15 x 25 yards, 3 v 3 on a field of 20 x 30 yards, 4 v 4 on a field of 25 x 40 yards, and 5 v 5 on a field of 30 x 40 yards.

The suggested games for observing players older than ten are 6 v 6 to 11 v 11 and should be used to complement games of 5 v 5. The small-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 11 v 11 should always be played to goals and with goal keepers. The field sizes will vary, but generally 5 v 5 is played on a field of 30 x 40 yards and 8 v 8 is played on a field of 50 x 70 yards.

To assess improvement with the grids, it is suggested that you use a pre-, mid- and post-season approach. Choose 3 to 5 characteristics that you would like to assess at the beginning of the season, set up the appropriate game for your players and watch them play. Examine the results and develop your practice plans to focus on improving your players ability in the selected areas. Assess your players again in the middle of the season and again at the end. The outcome of this process will hopefully be that your players have improved. You can also use your actual games to do similar assessments. Using this criteria-based approach will help focus your efforts on what is most important, that is, player improvement. Do not hesitate to modify the criteria, these are intended to serve as only a starting point for the development of your own evaluation tools. Good luck!