

What Characteristics are Lincoln High School Soccer Coaches Looking for in Their Players?

Dave Gosselin
Director of Coaching
Lincoln Spirit Club

Introduction: Over the last three years as Director of Coaching of the Lincoln Spirit Soccer Club, I consistently hear questions related to the topic of how should our club coaches be preparing players for the high school level. In order to address this topic, I asked Lincoln-based high school coaches to address four questions:

1. Based on your experience, on which two or three technical or tactical soccer abilities do our Lincoln area high school players need to improve?
2. Besides a player's soccer abilities, what qualities do you look for in a player that will help them be successful as a high school player?
3. How important of a role does club soccer play in your high school program? What are the positive contributions? What contributions could be improved?
4. What suggestions do you have for our club as to how we can serve the wide range and diverse nature of our player pool to preparing them better to play at the high school level?

The following represents a summary of the responses that I received from Jeff Hoham and Chuck Morgan, boys and girls coaches, respectively, from Lincoln East High School, Nathan Bassett and John Kolar, boys and girls coaches, respectively, from Lincoln Lutheran High School, Jeremy Ekeler, girls coach, Pius X High School, Tom Kolbe, boys coach, Lincoln High School, Dan Tharp, girls coach, Lincoln Southwest High School. Hoham, Morgan and Ekeler have coached state championship teams. Bassett and Kolar have coached their teams to the state tournament. I would sincerely like to thank these coaches for their thoughtful responses. Individual replies are provided below. They have been edited to provide a consistent format.

Summary: An examination of all the responses to the four questions yield several key themes, which coaches should consider as they train their players and prepare them for high school soccer.

Theme one is first touch. A good first touch is more than just making the soft touch when receiving the ball. A good first touch is more about gaining control of the ball with a plan as to what you are going to do with your second touch. Players must be able to make an effective first touch with different parts of the body, whether it is their feet, chest or head. Players need to be able to make the first touch under pressure when receiving a long ball out of the air, a short pass along the ground, or a bouncing ball in front of the goal. Of course to get the first touch, aggressive play is important especially to get the first touch on 50-50 balls. The first touch is the most important. Players of all ages and skill levels can always improve this aspect of their game.

Theme two is the ability to strike the ball accurately over both short and long distances. The ability to deliver a long ball with accuracy is particularly challenging for girls. This needs to be improved because as players advance into high school, they will need this skill to improve their team's ability to switch fields and the point of attack, which, in turn, will allow a team to more effectively use the entire field as they organize their attack or possess the ball. In addition, the ability to strike the ball with accuracy from a distance will make an individual more dangerous in terms of being a scoring threat. Passing accuracy at both short and long distances plus an improved first touch as outlined in theme one will allow teams to improve their ability to possess the ball.

Theme three is developing field awareness in the context of recognizing the visual clues as to when to possess, switch fields, counterattack, and exploit space both with and without the ball. For example, when a player gains control of the ball in the middle third of the field, he/she needs to be able to read the current status of the defensive team. Are they pushed up and flat? Options include playing the ball to a corner flag for a flank player to run on to. It may be to play a ball through a seam in the defensive line. Is the defending team playing back? This may require the ball to be played into an attacking players feet who then combines with a teammate and makes a run into space to unbalance the defense. There are many options, but players need to learn what their options are and how to create them.

Theme four is related to recognizing the abilities of your players and playing to their strengths. More succinctly, not all teams can play the same system. The system for a given team must be designed around the players that you have, not necessarily trying to fit your players into a specific system. Nathan Bassett makes this very important point in his comments related to the Lincoln Lutheran boys team. He recognizes that he has three sport athletes who contribute a great deal to the success of their program but he also recognizes that they do not have a great understanding of the tactical aspects of possession soccer. They struggle with this style of play. Therefore, Lincoln Lutheran uses a direct style of play that takes advantage of the athleticism of their players. This leads to another important point alluded to by Jeff Hoham that the more knowledge and experience that players have playing more than one position, the more valuable they are to the team. Players need to be willing to play a variety of positions. This could in the long run lead to more opportunities to play.

Theme five is one versus one defending, which is rather understated in the coach's comments. Winning starts with the 1 v 1 battles. Only one player usually gets to the ball first to take that very important first touch. However, if the player does not get to the ball first, that player by default becomes the first defender. John Kolar put it well when he said, "how many times do you hear coaches say, 'Don't dive in!'" Patience is a virtue when it comes to defending. Get immediate pressure on the ball, but in a controlled way because at least eight times out of ten if the defending player is patient the attacking player will take a bad touch and now the defender is the first attacker. Although Anson Dorrance did not respond to my survey, his advice to all youth players is: "don't be one-sided...be the kind of player who is relentless on defense."

Theme six is the personal attributes and the character of the players. These include attitude, ability to be a team player, and commitment. Attitude includes many things such as, the player tries to keep learning, demonstrates a willingness to try new concepts, and take chances instead of remaining in a comfort zone. These types of attitudes lead to a characteristic that can be referred to as coachability. Another attitude that coaches look for is passion and a desire to play the game and to use these to make up for what a team may lack in talent.

Being a team player includes having the ability to get along with others, encourage their teammates, and to help build a positive team environment. Being a team player also relates to coachability and to players learning to understand their role on the team. Not everyone is going to start. Not everyone is going to play the same number of minutes. Although it is important for the player to try and understand their role, it is also important for the coach to assist them in their understanding by showing them explicitly how they contribute to the success of team and that they are valued. Helping female players understand their role on the team is exceedingly important to overall team chemistry. Coaches are not looking for players who are showboats, or only me type players. It takes 11 players to win a soccer game. Coaches have little or no time for this type of player.

Players need to show that they are committed to doing what it takes to become better and to helping the team. At Pius, this means working hard day in and day out, being a grinder, and earning it in the weight room. Commitment also includes what a player does in the off season to get better as well as what a player is willing to do on and off the field to help the team be successful.

Theme seven is communication. Coaches want players to have the maturity to communicate directly with them and to take responsibility for communicating with them. This responsibility does not lie with the parents. Communication is not an inherent skill. To be successful at communication, it must be practiced. Coaches at all levels need to help their players learn the art of communication. To do this, an environment needs to be established where players are encouraged to express themselves without fear of retribution from the coach who may not necessarily agree with the player's perspective or understand it.

Theme eight is high school soccer players benefit from both club soccer and playing for their high school team. However, in order for soccer players to truly benefit from both soccer venues each one needs to recognize and value the contribution that each makes towards the development of the soccer player as a person. Currently, it appears that the high school coaches have better appreciation of club soccer's contributions to the player than vice versa. It does not, nor should it have to be a choice between club or high school soccer. John Kolar echoes the feelings of several of the coaches by stating that most high school players will go to their 10 year high school reunion, but not their 10 year club team reunion.

Theme nine is related to what the Spirit Club needs to do help prepare players for the high school environment. Our club needs to create opportunities for players to experience higher levels of soccer play while not discounting the importance of playing with friends. Our coaches need to take advantage of opportunities to develop their skills. We also need to improve the communication between club coaches and high school coaches to create a more collaborative environment for player development.

Individual Coach Responses

Question 1. Based on your experience, on which two or three technical or tactical soccer abilities do our Lincoln area high school players need to improve?

Jeff Hoham –

1. Field awareness.
2. Knowledge and experience playing more than one position
3. Aggressiveness.

John Kolar - Top Three technical skills:

1. first touch. **Comment:** always can work on first touch
2. 1v1 defense. **Comment:** how many times do you hear coaches say, "Don't dive in!"
3. Winning balls in air under pressure. **Comment:** most players can win the ball, but can they do this with a 50/50 ball?

John Kolar - Top Three Tactical Skills:

1. Counter attack. **Comment:** this is important for a team that might not be as skilled but can take advantage of those few opportunities
2. Changing the point of attack. **Comment:** visual cues, short quick passes vs long ball, etc.
3. Throw ins. **Comment:** almost the same as counter attack, but getting players to understand how to create space for other players and learning to run on to the ball instead of playing with your back to the goal on throw ins.

Chuck Morgan -

1. Heading
2. Receiving served or passed balls.

Comments: We, and I'm just as guilty, do not spend enough time teaching or preparing our athletes to head the ball properly and how to use that ability in a tactical aspect of the game. As for cleaning up a lofted or long flighted ball, again we (guilty) need to spend more time teaching our players how to receive and take balls out of the air instead of just using a foot that is raised to knock it down.

Tom Kolbe -

1. Short passes to build the attack (Technical skill)
2. Using the entire field (Tactical skill)
3. Defending with an off balanced defense (Tactical Skill)

Dan Tharp -

1. Touch on the ball
2. Movement off the ball seem to be the main two areas that we are lacking in

Nathan Basset -

1. Biggest challenge is working on or around a possession game includes seeing the field and ball passing skills.

Comments: We have three sport athletes who contribute a great deal to the success of our program but they do not understand the tactical aspects of possession soccer. We are a more direct attack team because that plays to our strengths as a team. I know that some bigger schools have better possession than we do but from the ranks of a small (200 student) school in Lincoln, we struggle with possession most.

Jeremy Ekeler

1. Striking the ball. **Comment:** This is especially true for the female players and long passing (in the air). It is also prevalent in many other situations as well. (shooting, short passing, etc.)
2. First touch. **Comment:** Every player needs to be able to touch with a purpose in order to use and exploit space, which is paramount to the game of soccer.
3. Switching fields. **Comment:** This is related to point 1, striking the long ball which is pretty much a non-existent quality in the girls high school game.

Question 2. Besides a players soccer abilities, what qualities do you look for in a player that will help them be successful as a high school player?

Jeff Hoham – See response to #1, along with speed, endurance and of course touch

John Kolar - Top Three qualities:

1. Desire - gunness - a high work rate with a heart of determination. Knowing the difference between "sick'em and come here"
2. Ability to get a long with others
3. Ability to use other teammates out on the field to raise the level of play for the team

Chuck Morgan - 1. A positive attitude.

2. Coachable. **Comment:** will the player try to keep learning, does she demonstrate a willingness to try new concepts, to take chances instead of remaining in a comfort zone
3. Chemistry. **Comment:** what qualities will she bring to the team, encouragement, desire, commitment.

Tom Kolbe -

1. Speed
2. Attitude. **Comment:** The attitude and dispositions are different in a high school then a club. These are usually better developed in my multiple sport athletes.

Dan Tharp -

1. Selflessness.
2. Ability to accept a variety of roles to benefit the team as a whole.
3. Maturity to communicate. **Comment:** I want players to stand up for themselves, not hiding behind parents for all communication with the coaching staff.

Nathan Bassett - 1. Passion. **Comment:** We beat some very good teams because we work hard and we really desire to leave it all on the field.

2. Team player. **Comment:** We make in passion and team unity what we lack in talent. If a kid is a showboat or only me type player we have no time for his talents. We win the game with 11 on the field and 6 on the bench. Never have we beaten a team with one talented player.

Jeremy Ekeler – 1. Grinders. **Comment:** We want girls who will earn it in the weight room, at conditioning sessions and with their attitude get playing time. We had better defenders (technically and tactically) than two of our girls in the back in 2005. But we had none that worked harder, and that proved to be the difference as we often bent, but were too tough to break. Girls who embrace work, dedication, character and passion for the game will succeed in the game and in life. Girls who are simply handed things will never be asked to work, will never have to be dedicated and have no purpose for passion.

Question 3. How important of a role does club soccer play in your high school program? What are the positive contributions? What contributions could be improved?

Jeff Hoham – We support our club soccer programs to the fullest. Without club sports, high school programs would suffer greatly from every aspect imaginable. Sportsmanship, skill set development, and simply being a part of a team are all positive contributions that clubs offer young people at every level.

John Kolar - Good club coaches are extremely valuable to my high school program. Especially, if they understand the game and are willing to educate themselves to make themselves better coaches. Most club coaches are good people who want to help their athletes become better players.

Club Coaches need to encourage their high school players to enjoy their high school years. Most high school players will go to their 10 year high school reunion, but not their 10 year club team reunion.

Chuck Morgan - I feel it is important to have club soccer. There is more time for training the technical and tactical part of the game than in High School. The positives are more practice where instruction may be given and the ability to play games and get repetition of playing time, touches, and interaction with other players.

Tom Kolbe - Club play is essential to our success. Players that know each other and can anticipate each other is huge. Our season is so intense that it takes a month of being a team at times for them to come together. Teaching the players to make decisions and play with multiple styles.

Dan Tharp - Very important, we only have them for two months of training sessions. We are very dependent on the club teams that they play for the majority of the year for tactical and technical improvements. Positive-playing with teammates who end up with them on a particular high school team allows them to understand how they will react to certain situations during a match.

Nathan Basset - We build our soccer program around our club players. They form the nucleus of our talent and then we take athletic guys and put them where they can help us most. Without a few club level players we would struggle to win some of the games we do. The positive contributions are obviously their technical soundness. Another positive is their understanding of how the game is played i.e. how to pass when to pass where to pass when to shoot where the ball should be played = possession.

While I think club is great for developing skills for players I am concerned that city clubs will drive the sport from Nebraska high schools. Just last spring I read an article where several players from Omaha were going to forego their high school season to play for their elite club teams. This is a trend that must be stopped. Club coaches want what is best for their kids but only their own 11-15. Soccer must remain in high schools and club coaches must not pressure their kids to play club "or else". 14 year olds should not be given demands from coaches to play only for their club. High school soccer might not be pretty at all levels but it certainly develops players. If clubs continue to focus on year round schedules then only rich, suburban kids will be playing the sport or the "good teams" and high school soccer will be left without talent or students playing for their school which is a lot better than playing for just their club. Allow for some downtime away from club soccer so that players can have a break. This idea that you can only be good if you do it all year round from age 3 needs to stop. Not everyone is Freddy Adu, most are like Eddie Johnson. Who has made the bigger impact for the men's national team in the past year and who is the prodigy? If clubs want to help the high school game have the coaches of these great club teams give clinics or serve as coaching assistants to the high school coach. Have their players play high school soccer.

Jeremy Ekeler - Club soccer is a huge bonus for us on a lot of levels. First, I'm no genius about the game, but my assistants are. Each of our assistants has roots in the club system. Secondly, the skills our players bring from club are essential as we piece together our unit of players. Thirdly, it's very easy to see what player played for what coach. The combinations of talent and skill help us put together a diverse and well-rounded team. Lastly, because of the politics and system of clubs, our girls immensely enjoy their high school season as they have something to base it against. They also love their club teammates, but it heightens their feelings of pride when the name on the front means more than the one on the back (which is generally not true in all club sports). Despite the belief

of many club coaches, it's still high school ball that impacts communities and as such, gets headlines.

As for what club coaches can do better, stereotypes of high school coaches need to be dropped. Open up the lines of communication. Club coaches may be a great, but these players in the high school system are working for great people. Personally, I'd rather see us create great people than great players. If we work together, we can do both and I know the high school community is reaching out. Not all club coaches fall into the stereotype that I know I'm creating. However, many do. And what's worse, many openly bash high school ball right in front of their players. It's too bad because they're the ones missing out. Oh yeah, and I've yet to see a 10 Year Club Reunion, but I know my high school girls will talk for years to come and all be back for their 10 Year High School reunion.

Question 4. What suggestions do you have for our (Spirit) club as to how we can serve the wide range and diverse nature of our player pool to preparing them better to play at the high school level?

John Kolar - I'm assuming that you are talking about the Spirit Soccer Club. I would find a way to raise the level of play (i.e. make it more competitive) for players. I don't have an answer because a lot of players believe that tryout and select teams are better than teams who do not go through this process. I would try to get one very good team per age group where the players are more committed, and then have other teams that want to play and develop, but not necessarily at the higher level. In the end, it is different for girls than boys. Don't discount the need for players to want to play with their friends.

Chuck Morgan - I would love to see more coaching clinics put on. I would also like to see them at the lower level. Could you bring in a "Big Time Coach"? to offer at the perspective age level of high school players and open it up to the community?

Tom Kolbe - Small sided games very frequent in training.

Dan Tharp - Improve coaches understanding of the game, encourage small-sided leagues that allow for more touches on the ball, and ensuring that players aren't burned out and can adapt to a wide variety of positions.

Nathan Bassett - Recruit and train coaches who will coach at all levels of talent. Work with high school coaches to identify potential talent rather than work with just club coaches. The club circuit tends to be, at least from the way-outside, political. It is political in the sense that its who you know not who is the best. I may have this all wrong and I hope that I do, but it should be about talent, not whose brother or son you are or who thinks you are good.' Are there object ways to identify and develop talent? It should be about the talent, not the name or perceived reputation.

Jeremy Ekeler - This is simple to me: 1.) Keep the lines of communication open. 2.) Make sure all of your coaches respect our game as much as they do their game. 3.) Watch high school soccer. High school coaches watch club all the time, so return the favor. 4.) Work with high school coaches as players arrive at schools. "Here's where Susie needs to get. Here's how you can help..." We do this with Coach Walker and coaches all over the country for our girls and the combined evaluations of players (as players AND people) is a huge reason our girls develop successfully. We work with clubs (when allowed), their future schools and each other to constantly evaluate and dissect our girls' play and attitude. Help from ALL clubs would be nice in this area.