

What Makes an Olympic Development Program Player?

Many parents often ask what it takes for their child to become an Olympic Development Program (ODP), or State Team player? Is it the best 18 players who are selected, regardless of position, or is it the best team of players? What qualities separate those selected from those who are not? This article will help answer some of these questions.

Player Evaluation

Team selection always begins with an assessment of individual players. There are four criteria that form the basis for most evaluation schemes. These four criteria, made popular by the Dutch over the past decade, or so, are collapsed into the acronym “TIPS,” which stands for

Technique

In-sight

Personality

Speed

The most critical quality for all soccer players is technique. This would include the player’s overall range of techniques and the speed and ease with which they secure and use the ball. A player’s balance and agility are closely related to technical range and at each successive level of play technique under pressure becomes the most obvious starting point for distinguishing between players.

Tactical insight is the second element in the equation. The talent evaluation of this area looks at how players solve small-group tactical problems and the degree to which they play in a structured team organization. At the younger ages, tactical insight is less important than technique and speed. However, as players mature into their mid and late-teens, they are often chosen for representative teams based on their superior qualities in a position, or because of their adaptability to other roles within the team.

The third quality is personality, and it is here that the players within a squad must be balanced to allow a team to be built from the complementary sum of its parts. Personality players are usually the first to catch a coach’s eye and generally form the starting point for the team building process. In evaluating a group of players, it is readily apparent that they come with an assortment of qualities. Some have exceptional dribbling skills, while others have explosive speed; some have excellent passing range, while others dominate in the air; some are resolute defenders, while others impress by their ability to read the game and lead others; some very ordinary players are coachable and work hard and impress by their selflessness, while some very talented players are lazy and frustrate through their unwillingness to work for themselves or the team; some players simply score goals, while others create chances for others through their set-up play; some gifted younger players are worthy of investing time and opportunity, even if they are physically overmatched; some players are so physically dominant that they are hard to ignore, even when their

skills are a little rough around the edges. In contrast, some players are so volatile and high risk, or so one-dimensional in their qualities, that their selection poses a very difficult decision; in these situations, only the exceptionally talented players are moved along within the system, but it is not uncommon for these very talented players to be excluded from international teams because their personality or playing qualities do not match the vision of the coach, or the “esprit de corps” (spirit and work ethic) within the existing squad.

Finally, the quality that often separates the good player from the exceptional player is speed. As a “relatively” genetic asset, physical speed from “A” to “B” is always part of an overall assessment. At the top levels, there are no slow players, although there are some international class players who are not considered “fast.” Speed can also include the time players take to assess match situations and take appropriate action (tactical speed) and the speed with which players control and use the ball (technical speed).

Team Selection

Choosing representative teams is, in large part, a question of balance and adaptability and it is not always the best eighteen attacking players who are chosen to fill the roster spots. Coaches must always endeavor to blend ball-winners with “skill” players in order to create a balanced team that can defend, and create scoring chances from both the center and the flanks.

Adaptability is also a key determinant in player selection. When a professional or national team coach needs a player to fill a role on the left side of midfield, for example, the top left-sided prospects are invited into the squad to compete for that specific role. With established professional and international teams, new players are usually selected for their ability to fill existing roles within an existing system. Ironically, the arrival of new players can also challenge the coach to consider ways in which the established playing formation and system can be changed to accommodate the qualities of the new players.

In contrast, when a representative team is selected at the youth level, identifying the best players is often the starting point for team selection and it is here that the versatility of players becomes more critical for the final analysis. At the club level, the best all-round players are usually found in central positions. At the ODP level, this glut of central players poses a dilemma for the selecting coaches. Assuming there is a rank-ordering of these central players, if the second tier players cannot play in flank positions, they are likely to be passed over in favor of naturally left-sided players and other natural wide players, even though these players may not possess the same overall range of qualities. A team cannot consist of eleven central midfield players.

Another critical factor at the youth level is “potential.” Because everyone matures at vastly differing rates during puberty, cohorts may be as much as a foot and 40 pounds apart in height and weight. At the younger ages in particular, care must be taken to prioritize from the “TIPS” analysis. A 13-year-old with wonderful skills will likely be selected over a physically mature peer who has an immediate impact but limited technical

upside. Conversely, the 16-year-old ball wizard who cannot out-run, out-think, or out-play the physically stronger opponent is unlikely to be given the benefit of the doubt at that stage. Such is the difficulty in youth team selection.

Summary.

All team selections, in some way, reflect the bias of the head coach, except perhaps the choice of first-tier players who are always the easiest to select. It is with the middle and bottom tier selections that coaches earn their salt, and where personal bias in terms of style of play and overall team balance enter into the final decisions. In this forum, bias is not necessarily regarded as detrimental, but simply a fact of life. Coaches with experience make selections based on potential at the next level and potential over time, with the physical dimension often the last variable considered in the equation. Selecting the second and third tier players reflect educated guesses that one player has more of the tangible and intangible qualities to succeed than another. Without this perspective, the fine line in selecting one player over another can be lost on most observers. Sometimes the coach is wrong; more often than not, their experience bears out the selection.

Philosophically, ODP is viewed as a selection process and not a club system. With four observation opportunities during the winter months, the process is long enough to ensure credibility in the selections, while not being overly intrusive to the day-to-day functioning of our clubs. In the ODP process, up to four coaches observe every session and provide feedback to the head coach. With 20-30 players in each age-group pool, this reduces the possibility than a player will be accidentally overlooked, and increases the likelihood that the final decisions will be made on the basis of talent, potential and team balance.