Soccer eyeQ

see more | think quicker | play better

Developing Game Awareness

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Welcome to this report on Developing Game Awareness. In this report I will be identifying, defining and discussing concepts that I believe are essential for developing players who can compete at the highest levels of the modern game.

First of all, I will look at the three building blocks for skilled performance in soccer and I will propose how elite and non-elite players apply these in a very different manner.

I will then identify the five key elements that affect what a player should be doing in the game. As coaches, you may find that you are familiar with these elements because, as with anything in soccer, it is not rocket science!

On page 11, I will discuss some thoughts on where a player’s attention should be focussed during the game. I find it surprising that many players simply do not have any idea of what is going on around them and I will compare where the majority of players are, and where they actually should be.

I will then put forward some ideas on the mental capacity that players require to play the game at the elite level. The game of soccer is highly dynamic and frequently places multiple demands on our players – how do we prepare them for that?

On page 18, I will conclude by presenting a model for player performance at the elite level – the Soccer eyeQ A³ Continuum.

Please enjoy this report and I would welcome any thoughts or feedback that you may have to offer.
Perception-Decision-Action, these are the three fundamental components of skilled performance in soccer.

**Perception:** the use of the senses to take in information from the game picture

**Decision:** the player will decide what course of action to take, based on the perceptual information

**Action:** the execution of a technique, movement or some other game action

In soccer almost every decision a player makes, and almost everything they do, is because of a visual trigger.

However, as coaches, we have traditionally focussed on developing technique.
On the previous page I have identified the three components as *Perception-Decision-Action* but, to keep it simple, I normally refer to this as *See-Think-Do*.

At first this would seem to be a very linear process and, unfortunately, that is precisely how many players perform.

The average player focuses so intently on the ball, THEN they control it, THEN they have a look, THEN they decide what to and only THEN do they carry out their game action – if they haven’t been tackled by this point.

Because of this they are, invariably, too slow to recognise opportunities and the tempo of their play is far too slow.

This player is regularly caught in possession of the ball, or caught out of position on the pitch.
This is the **Soccer eyeQ Elite Performance Cycle**.

As I have already discussed, the average player appears to go through a very linear *See-Think-Do* series of actions. However, the elite player carries out these in a far more fluid and cyclical process.

Elite players continuously assess their options, quickly adjust to the game situation, consistently make better decisions and, as a result, execute more effective game actions.

Elite players have the physical and mental dexterity to keep their body moving AND control the ball AND think about what they’re going to do next.

Indeed, the very best already know what they will do with the ball before they even get it.
So, there you have it – the three essential components of skilled performance in soccer. Some of you may have already known these and others will be having an “of course” moment, but how our players perform really can be simplified into these three elements.

However, as simple as these three things seem, if there is a failure or breakdown in performance in any of these aspects then it is highly unlikely that a player will be able to compete consistently at the highest level.

As soccer coaches, we have traditionally concentrated on developing the technical aspects of performance (DO), whilst neglecting to develop the cognitive elements (SEE & THINK).

We really must offer our players a training environment that exposes them to far more decision-making opportunities than we currently do. And we must also create an environment that will enhance the perceptual abilities – it is simply not good enough to just TELL players to “have a look”, we must force them until it becomes habit.

As you have seen in the Elite Performance Cycle, the players should be able to rapidly move through the See-Think-Do process in dynamic, fluid manner.

But, what is it they have to “See” and “Think” about? We will now have a look at the key game variables that affect a player’s role and responsibility at any moment in the game, and ultimately dictate what the player should or should not be doing.
The **Soccer eyeQ Game Intelligence Funnel** identifies and defines the key variables that affect what your players should be doing on the pitch.

There are 5 critical pieces of information that a player must know in order to understand their role and responsibility at any moment in the game.

Identifying and understanding the relationship with these 5 key variables, and recognising the impact these have on the game situation, will determine how effective your players’ decisions and game actions are.
The 5 key factors that dictate a player’s roles & responsibilities at any time in the game are:

**Ball:** where is it, who has it and what can they do with it?

**Teammates:** where are they, normally guided by team formation, and what are they doing?

**Opponents:** where are they and what are they doing?

**Area of Play:** attacking third, defensive third or middle third?

**State of Play:** 1-0 down with 5 minute to go and chasing the game or 1-0 up and trying to shut it down
Yet again, how simple was that? And, once again, some of you will have easily identified these variables and others will have had another “of course” moment.

However, there are two distinct categories of game variable – “Dynamic Game Variables” (DGVs) and “Semistatic Game Variables” (SGVs).

Let’s first of all have a look at the SGVs, these are: Area of Play and State of Play. I have defined Area of Play as Semistatic because the field of play does not move, it is where it is. However, where the player is on the pitch does change and this position will have a dramatic effect on that player’s job. The State of Play is also an SGV because the score is what it is at that moment in time, but it can change throughout the game. And, once again, this will have a direct effect upon how the player is expected to carry out their job.

This means that the Ball, Teammates & Opponents are DGVs. I have defined these as Dynamic because usually, during a normal phase of the game, either the ball, the teammates or the opponents are moving – and, more often than not, all three are moving at the same time!

So, how does a player know where they are in relation to these dynamic game variables? Simple really – have a look!

Now that we have defined what the players should be aware of in order to understand their role in the game lets have a look at how they should be focussing their attention.
This model is based on the model of attention theorised by Robert Nideffer (1976)\(^1\), which highlighted 2 dimensions of attention: width (broad/narrow – A/B) and direction (external/internal – 1/2). These combinations give us:

A1 – evaluates a lot of information from the environment

A2 – can consider multiple streams of information and strategize

B1 – focuses attention on a single or very limited number of external cues

B2 – focuses on an internal objective such as executing a technique

This shows the profile of the average soccer player, which shows a strong tendency towards B1 and B2.

This is because the average player has a tendency to ball-watch during a game (B1) as opposed to scanning the field for other visual cues.

Once the average player becomes directly involved in the play, such as receiving a pass, he will focus intently on the ball and will then concentrate on the technique he is seeking to execute (B2).

As I have mentioned before, this player is frequently caught out of position on the pitch (because he is ball-watching) and is regularly caught in possession of the ball (because he takes too long and doesn’t know what his options are).
This diagram illustrates where elite performers are, and the attentional skillset that we need to be moving our players towards.

As you can see elite performers require a strong inclination towards A1 & A2.

Elite players must continuously scan the field of play (A1), identifying pockets of space and the position of other players (teammates and opponents).

As they are assessing the play they should be strategizing and developing effective solutions for the game situation (A2), such as future passing options and defensive/offensive movements.
Once again, as you can see, this is not rocket science. Indeed, the idea of getting players to play with their head up is not new.

However, the vast majority of coaches I see deliver what I call “ball-focused” sessions. Now, let me take a moment to define this because some of you may infer from “ball-focused” that this means a ball is being used during most of the session, which would be a good thing. Indeed, most coaches are trying to involve the ball during training more often now than they ever used to – who else remembers spending 80 minutes of a 90 minute training session doing laps or other types of running?

Using a ball is great but, and this is very important, what I mean by “ball-focused” is that all that the player ever needs to do in the session is look at the ball – in fact, in the majority of sessions I watch, they are actively encouraged to do so.

“Keep your eye on the ball” is a mantra frequently extolled at training grounds around the world. However, as far as I am concerned, it is very nearly the worst coaching phrase ever invented. Sure there is a time and place, and very specific moments, that a player should keep his eye on the ball but for the vast majority of the game they should, in fact, be keeping their eye off it!

The problem is that it has been used so much that we now have players that do exactly that, keep their eye on the ball. It has become such a habit for them that they very rarely ever take their eye off it, which they should be doing regularly to scan the pitch too see their options.

Part of the problem for the player is that thinking about how to control the ball and looking around to see where other players are is, as far as the mind and body are concerned, two jobs to be done at the same time. Let’s now look at that.
As previously mentioned in this report the average player focuses intently on the ball, THEN they control it, THEN they have a look, THEN they decide what to and only THEN do they carry out their game action.

They focus intently on each individual task as it comes along, because that is all they **CAN** do.

If you could consider the analogy of someone’s attentional bandwidth (how many tasks they can do at once) to be a half-pint glass, then just thinking about controlling the ball fills the average player’s glass. Indeed, for some it actually makes it overflow!

The body and mind only really likes to do one job at a time, but you can train it to do more.
At Soccer eyeQ our simple philosophy, and continuing the analogy, is that we **MUST** train the players to have a bigger glass.

Let’s train the players to have a pint glass. As a result, if the task of controlling the ball takes that half-pint of attention the players would now have a half-pint spare capacity, which they could use for other activities and actions.

This way they will consistently be able to deal with more information, more decisions and more jobs in any one game situation.

In order to achieve this, we must continually expose the players to training environments that overload to their attentional bandwidth – ones that make their glass overflow!
The game of soccer is a hugely cognitive sport. It’s fast, it’s dynamic and it frequently places multiple demands on the player all at the one time.

Yet, how often do we work on a player’s multi-tasking ability?

To me, it seems as if some coaches decide that in order for a player to play well we define that they need to be able to do jobs A, B & C. The coach will then work on developing the player’s ability level in job A and, once he is competent enough at that, he then gets moved on to job B. Once the player is good enough at job B he gets moved on to job C, training that aspect until they can do that too – and then he is thrown into the game. However, the game does not allow the player to only ever do one job at a time, yet those are the only demands he has faced in training – and we wonder why so many players fail to perform.

Remember, everything that you do can be considered as a job or a task – talking, looking, thinking and moving. These are all jobs, and it is surprising how adding just one seemingly simple element can affect performance as a whole.

I believe that it is imperative that we overload the players during training. If we create an environment that forces them to deal with 4 or 5 tasks during training, when the game only demands 2 or 3 jobs to be done at the same time, then the player will feel less pressure during competitive performance. The player will have greater composure when directly involved in the play, and will be far more likely to make the right decision.

Now that I have argued that players must have excellent multi-tasking abilities, let’s look at how they should be performing in the game.
The *Soccer eyeQ A⁵ Continuum* illustrates a cycle of actions that are essential for elite level performance in the modern game.

Some coaches will talk about reading the play and reacting to the game situation. However, soccer is becoming an increasingly dynamic sport, which requires players to be far more proactive during game situations in order to be effective.

The A⁵ model is a game performance continuum that we must move our players towards, if we want to improve both the individual and the team.
The central pillar of the continuum is assessing the game picture, as good situation awareness is the key to being effective in all of the other aspects.

**ASSESS:** the play around them

**ANTICIPATE:** how the play will develop

**ADJUST:** both physically and psychologically

**ACT:** execute the most effective game action

**ADAPT:** to the changing game situation

Although ASSESS is only listed first here, it should be understood that it is a continuous process and should be a regular action between each of the others – my fundamental ABCs of awareness are “Always Be Checking”!
As the Soccer eyeQ A^5 Continuum shows, the player should be continuously involved in the game in an active manner.

I must make one key point about the ACT element of this continuum. It is during this element that the player is required to perform a game action but, and quite significantly, this does not have to be with the ball. Remember, almost 98% of the game is played off-the-ball therefore the vast majority of game actions a player will execute will be off-the-ball movements.

Awareness is probably the most important skill a player can master, especially when it comes to their ability to make better game decisions.

The ability to anticipate is directly linked to a player’s awareness skills, which must be practised until they become habit. Even the simple act of looking around when the pressure is off, so the player knows where his teammates and opponents are will help the player make better decision in pressurized situations – he will already know his escape routes.

I frequently coach my players “ball moves, you move, have a look”. This quick cue phrase, which I call a QQ (for Quick Q), seems to impress upon them how important it is to take every opportunity available to assess what is going on around them.

However, tremendous concentration is required to consistently perform through the continuum for the entire match – sometimes this is because 98% of the game is spent off the ball.

And concentration is yet another skill in itself that, by and large, we fail to develop. Too many of the drills and exercise we use allow too many players to “switch off”. Just the other day I was observing a session, by a very good coach, and out of the 14 players involved in the exercise only 2-3 were directly involved
in the play at any one time. The rest had no role or responsibility for large periods of time and it was clear their brains had gone into neutral, even when they were directly involved the players largely just went through the motions. The coach frequently told them to concentrate – my first question was “on what?”, which was quickly followed by my second question of “and why?”

During this report I have discussed the Elite Performance Cycle, the Game Intelligence Funnel, Attentional Focus, Attentional Bandwidth and the A⁵ Continuum.

Hopefully I have highlighted how important these aspects are to player performance, and how we must look to develop essential abilities in our players.

**Players develop only as the environment demands development.**¹

I am hopeful that some coaches may review how they train their players, and may implement ideas that have been provoked by some of the ideas I have put forth.

However, this report is not intended to be a “told you so” document – it is intended to be the start of a discussion.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts, opinions and counter-arguments.

Enjoy your coaching!

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¹ adapted from a Sherman & Key (1932) study into child development but I believe is equally valid to soccer players
Soccer eyeQ

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coach education clinics
Our unique coach education clinics offer an insight to training methods previously only been available on the highest coaching awards in Europe, the prestigious UEFA Pro Licence and UEFA A Licence courses, and at the elite levels of the game.

The Soccer eyeQ clinics introduce coaches at all levels to our concepts, providing all coaches with the perfect opportunity to enhance their coaching knowledge and to continue their professional development.

In soccer, almost everything players do and almost every decision they make is because of what they see – and the sooner a player sees something, the quicker they can act. Improving a players “field vision”, the awareness of everything around them, will help them become a much more dynamic and effective player.

Soccer eyeQ presents a range of innovative exercises, which train and develop the essential skills and habits required for expert field vision.

As a result, the player will possess greater awareness on and off the ball and “see the game” more clearly – enabling them to anticipate the play, make better decisions and do the right thing, at the right time.

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