

Position Characteristics --- Matching Skills and Abilities to Specific Positions

In this segment, the generic positions are matched with player skills. This skill/position matching should only be used as a guide. Quite often, it is impossible to match players with exact skills to these positions.

Also, the position/skill list is one person's subjective assessment of positional skills and certain styles of play. For instance, a system that involves frequent center halfback overlaps into the wing area would require different player skill set than a system that uses the center halfback as drop support and a distribution center for the attack. Each coach will have to decide what skills he wants in each position.

Forwards/Strikers--these players should have a decent combination of short distance speed and quickness, shooting and heading abilities and dribbling skills. These players should be able to go long periods without touching a ball, yet become very goal oriented when the opportunity presents itself. Usually, one or two of the team's best athletes are in this position. These players need to be more reactive than cognitive--the opportunities are too short-lived for much thought. They should be very aggressive and perhaps selfish in nature.

Center Midfielders (offensive/defensive)--in most systems, these players are the core to the team. They did need to play defense and provide immediate support to the attack. A coach should want players that have very good field vision and awareness. Good passing and distribution skills are mandatory, but a desire to pass and play within a team system is just as important. These players cannot be timid in traffic. Some combination of strength and quickness is useful--this could be achieved with two different players in a two center halfback system. The ability to maintain ball possession, via dribbling, shielding and passing are also required skills. Speed is normally not a necessity in many systems for this position (especially if the system has more than one center back), but a high work rate and good endurance is certainly needed. Because of the frequency of ball touches, the best soccer athlete may be asked to man this position.

Wing Midfielders (outside midfielders)--this is a good spot for players that do not like to play in traffic where the opponent pressure is less. Wing players that have great straight ahead speed can cause other teams problems. Dribbling skills at speed are more often a requirement than close-in dribbling. Wing players that have the ability to cross the ball with distance and accuracy can allow a team to develop an attacking style from the wings. Wing players need to be able to recover on defense. Sometimes they are asked to balance a defense on the off-ball side by recovering back and picking up attacking players at the far post.

Fullbacks--backs should be strong and have a passive aggressive nature. Though this sounds oxymoronic, a back needs to be very controlled at times and then very strong and aggressive in the man-to-man, 50-50 ball battles. Because of the self-checking nature of the other team's attackers, a coach can sometimes get away with using players that have little speed and quickness. In other cases, at higher playing levels, it is

very necessary that a fullback have good quickness, average short distance speed and decent kicking skills. Players that are below average in speed can make up for this with good game knowledge and positioning. Exceptional dribbling skills are not a major requirement in this position. Fullbacks do need to be good communicators, constantly directing and offering information to teammates.

Sweeper--this position is similar to the fullback characteristics, however, there are certain differences. This player needs above average short distance and long distance speed, good kicking technique, a very good understanding of the team shape, and good communication skills. He needs to be able direct the players in front of him and run down through balls and breakaway attackers. Since he is support to the players in front of him, he must be able to pick up dribblers as they get past their marks or track down unmarked attackers as they make off-ball runs on goal. Often the sweeper is the first or second best athlete on the team and one of the fastest. This player must be a thinker with decent reaction time.

Stopper--this position requires a combination of sweeper, fullback and center half characteristics. The stopper often has some free rein, must be able to distribute the ball, win balls in traffic and get back to pick up unmarked attackers. At times, the stopper needs to recover into the sweeper position (deep center) if the sweeper is pulled out.

Goalkeeper--the first criteria is have very good hands--that is, the ability to catch a ball at all heights and angles. These players have to have quick feet and a healthy dose of fearlessness with going after a ball with an attacker coming in hard. Having strength and good size, specifically height, is a given. The goalkeeper must have great vision and awareness. The quicker this player can react, the better. The more experience a player has at this position, the better he should be at dealing with the different situations.