

Great Players Think Un-Alike

An Overview of Soccer Players' Psychological Traits (Forwards and Midfielders)

Peter Broadley, M.Ed.
Director of Soccer Operations, EXACT Sports
NSCAA Academy Staff, NC USYSA ODP Staff
peter.broadley@exactsports.org

The Best Coaches Understand Their Players' Minds: A New Analysis of Elite Soccer Players' Attitudes at the Forward and Midfielder Positions

"The aim of every soccer player and the coaches guiding them should be to develop a healthy lifestyle and well shaped mental and emotional attitudes that allow the player to maximize physical and technical potential."

- Bill Beswick, a Leader in Sports Psychology and England National Team Psychologist

I believe what Bill Beswick is saying in his book, *Focused for Soccer*, is that players' mental and emotional attitudes are of paramount importance for achieving on-the-field success. In order to develop the best development plan for athletes, coaches need to understand their own players' attitudes. Certainly, we can see with our eyes which players have poor physical technique and develop a training regime for them based on that. However, what about what occurs inside the players' heads? Coaches frequently ignore this component of athlete success, which I believe is a serious mistake.

In January of 2007, a 200-question psychometric diagnostic (the EXACT Sports Competitive Athlete Psychological Inventory) was administered to players invited to the USL and MLS combines. The objective of the diagnostic was to identify the key psychological ingredients for success at the elite collegiate level and to report back on these findings to the soccer community at large. While much of what the diagnostic uncovered is already conventional wisdom in the soccer community, what is intriguing is that this is the first time that we've really dived into players' minds to understand what the key ingredients for success are. This article quantifies the attitudes and behaviors of players with easily understood metrics that are useful for soccer coaches.

An Important Note for Coaches: I want to be clear that each player is an individual who has unique set of skills, behaviors, and perspectives. These findings can only serve as loose guideposts for coaches in considering what some of their players' strengths and weaknesses could be. Additionally, I want to stress that the weaknesses addressed herein are really opportunities for coaches to improve the on-the-field and off-the-field performance of their players. The attributes measured by these tests are flexible—as a coach, you *can* impact how players score on each of these metrics. Nothing is set in stone, and as I know from experience, a coach's guidance plays a strong part in shaping a player's future.

There are Quantifiable Differences between Elite Forwards and Midfielders

As a veteran soccer coach, it is particularly exciting to see that these are results from tests of the nation's best male college players. The test was administered to those players who have excelled at their positions. Let's take a 30,000 foot view of what was uncovered:

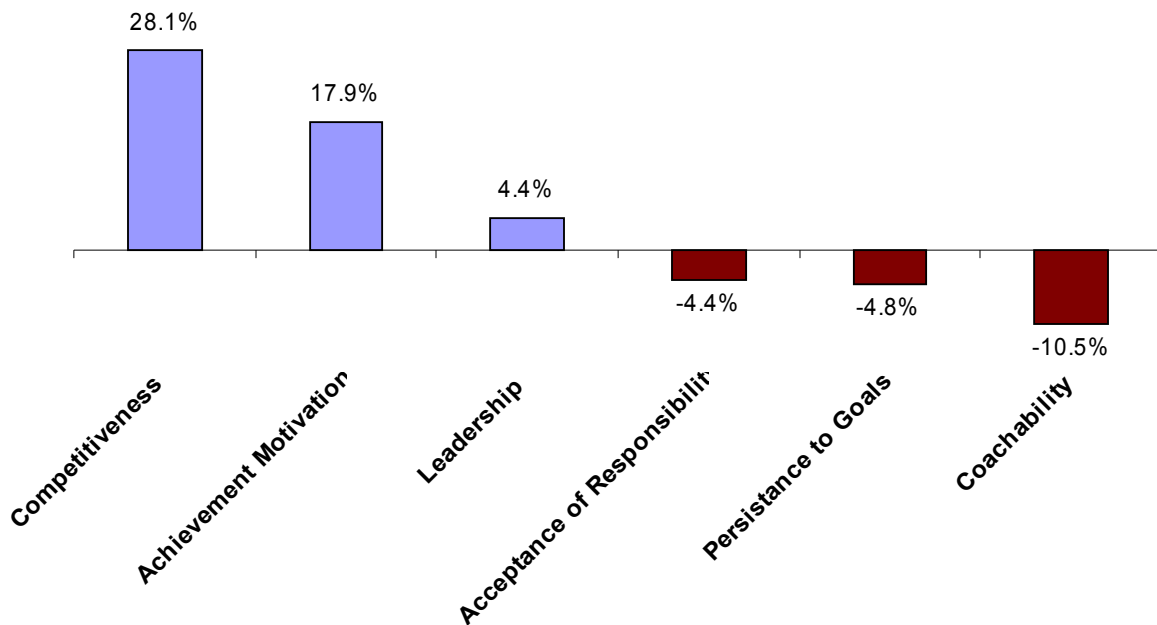
- As expected, forwards are more free-spirited than their peers on the field. They are exceptionally competitive, but less "coachable".
- Coaches will be surprised to see that midfielders were much less competitive than the forwards; however, they showed strong adaptability to social norms, which is indicative of a strong value system.
- All athletes who took the diagnostic scored very high on their training attitudes. In fact, on absolute terms, virtually all athletes measured with this behavioral diagnostic scored very high on every metric. This is not surprising given that the diagnostic was completed by some of the nation's best players.

For the balance of this article I am going to discuss position-specific attributes of forwards and midfielders, highlighting each position's three strongest and three weakest scores.

Coaching Forwards: Make Time For Feedback That Promotes Leadership and Run Exercises That Reward Persistence

Key Strengths	Key Development Opportunities
Competitive	Coachability
Achievement Motivation and Confidence	Acceptance of Responsibility
Leadership	Persistence to Goals

Figure 2: Comparative Scores of Forwards



As a coach, we know how difficult it can be to identify, recruit, and develop forwards. We need them to excel both on and off of the field. Relative to other players, forwards are strong in competitiveness, self-confidence, and leadership attributes. This probably comes as little surprise. So what I want to focus on here are development opportunities for forwards. As shown in Figure 2, forwards scored relatively low on their reaction to coaching. What is also surprising is that forwards scored lower on persistence to goals, even though they are highly competitive and motivated. These findings present to me a clear case that coaches should, in fact, pay even more attention to developing forwards towards success and playing a strong coaching role, no matter how challenging they are to coach. Sticking to the task and persistence are critical for a forward to be a successful goal scorer.

So how then, do we ensure that forwards are manageable by us and that we can provide them the guidance that they need to excel? Here are some tips that may be helpful:

1. Coaches need to give their forwards some additional attention at every practice session, maybe with a brief discussion about their last game, or the opposition in the next game, or how they may need to adjust their thinking to break down the defense. You can help to focus their attention on acceptance of responsibility as a team leader and sticking to their goals for the season with just a few minutes with them before, during or after each practice. Continuing to make runs even though they may not always receive the ball is critical to their ultimate success in scoring goals.
2. Building consistency in practice every day with repetition exercises like turning and shooting or working through patterns with their striking partner(s) in and around the

penalty area may help them to be more persistent with scoring chances and not give up too easily on opportunities to score. Diagram 1, below, provides an example of a pattern exercise for two forwards. This type of training allows for much needed interaction with the coach and his/her key players who most certainly will be expected to produce the goals that will win the next game.

Diagram #1: Pattern Exercise for 2 Forwards

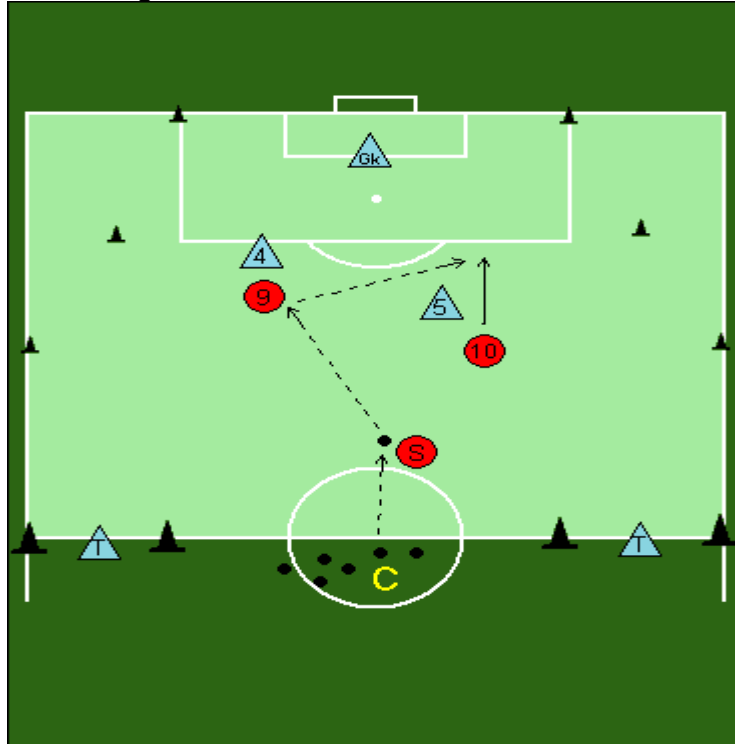
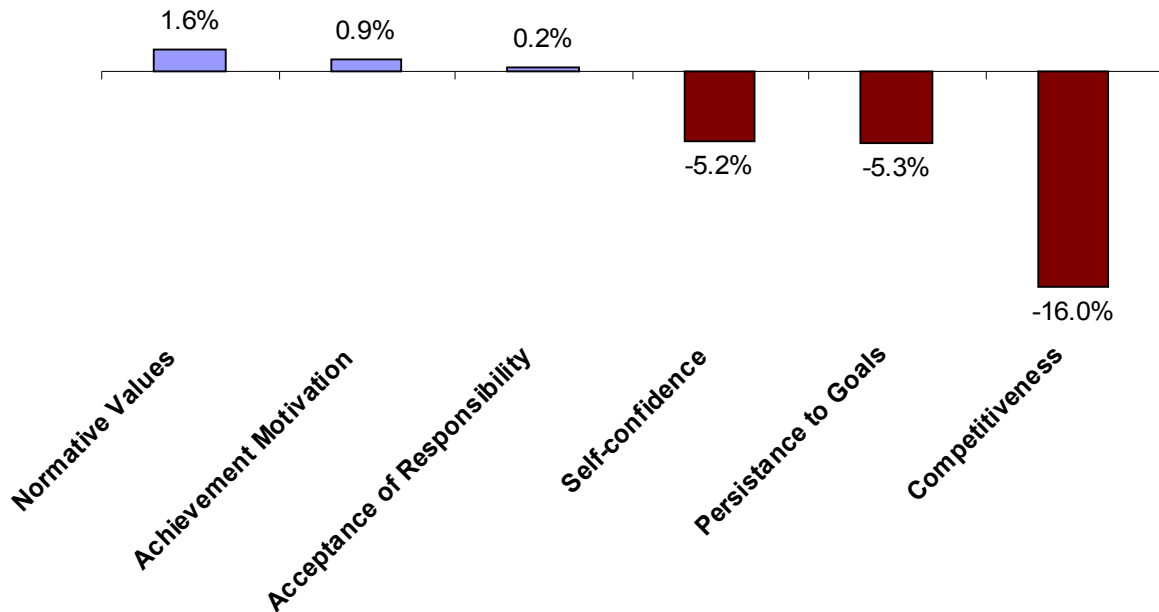


Diagram #1 description: The exercise is 2 versus 2 with the forwards attacking one goal. Target players are positioned in counter attack goals and are rotated in to the exercise. You could match your starting forwards up against your starting center backs to make the exercise more challenging, or have all of your forwards and attacking midfielders involved, taking turns to defend. The coach releases a ball to a server who starts the exercise after a goal is scored by either team or when the ball goes out of play.

Coaching Midfielders: Run Training Exercises That Are Very Goal-Oriented

Key Strengths	Key Development Opportunities
Normative Values	Competitiveness
Achievement Motivation	Self-confidence
Acceptance of Responsibility	Persistence to Goals

Figure 3: Comparative Scores of Midfielders



These results suggest that aspiring midfielders do not believe that being competitive is as important for their position as it is for other positions, such as for forwards. How can this be so when many of us would argue that the midfield is where many of the major battles take place for supremacy over the opponents? As coaches we are very aware of the specific roles that may be attached to midfielders, however do we take this into account in our training or simply lump them all together with possession drills? If we are asking a particular style of player to fulfill a defensive midfield role, do we train them in that role in a competitive practice environment that allows for opportunities to be a ball winner and destroy the opponents attacking momentum through the middle? Very often these midfielders find themselves playing keep away in a 40x40 yard square with no direction and no goal to defend and only possession in mind. Midfielders are prone to receiving mixed messages about what is expected of them in practice and in games: should they be the playmaker, winger, or the enforcer?

It is the coach's responsibility to build a competitive and confident team. Confidence, for instance, can be created by providing positive feedback to your players both "in the moment" and on a regular basis. Feedback should be given based on how hard the player worked to achieve their objective, regardless of whether or not they were successful. Many coaches make the mistake of providing positive feedback only if a certain outcome was achieved, such as a goal scored or a win. But to build self-confidence coaches must provide feedback on the *process* of achieving that goal. There are also very precise training exercises that can be created to slowly build the confidence in players so that they are ready to take on more challenges and reach their goals. Here are two examples showing how these attributes may be improved in practice:

1. When playing a possession game for midfielders there should always be a goal in mind for both teams. A specific number of passes or playing to a target player or into an end zone, are some examples. Players must be aware that you have confidence in their ability to perform when they are called on to play and many times this confidence must be developed and solidified in competitive practices that give them a chance to succeed. Diagram #2, below, provides an example of a game for midfielders.

Diagram #2: Midfielder Practice to Develop Competitiveness

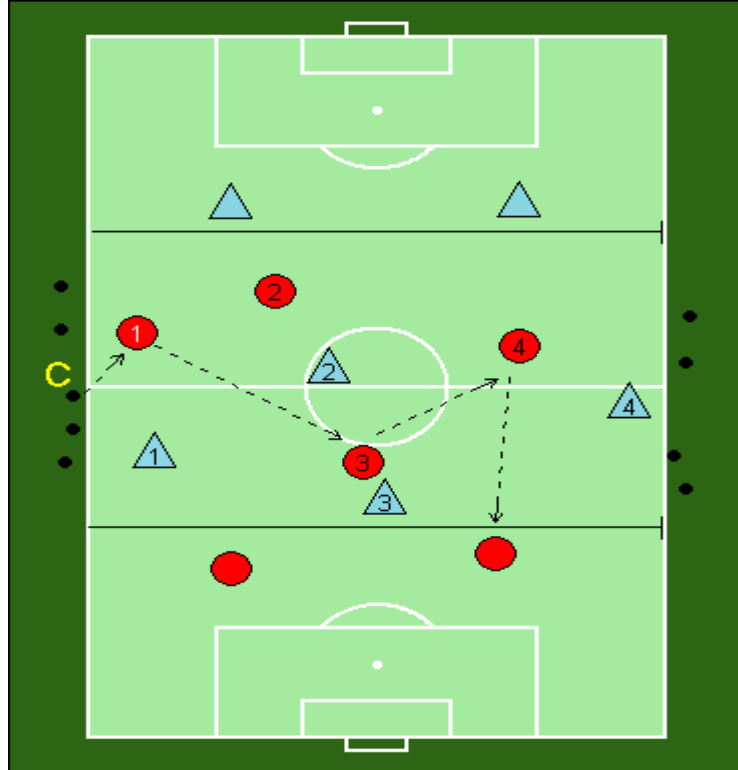


Diagram #2 Description: In this exercise players must connect at least 3 passes before playing to the target player to score. First team to 10 goals wins. Players rotate in, starters and reserves are mixed and the game can incorporate the forwards. The coach can serve a ball in after a goal is scored in a variety of ways that encourages players to fight for possession.

2. In the modern game it is extremely difficult for one player to completely dominate the midfield, even on the international level. Players may find it hard to stick to their goals if they feel that they are alone in their endeavor during a game. Working together towards a common goal is very important for the midfield unit, as dominance over the opponents is often marked by who controls the midfield space on the field. However this is not enough as it must be dominance with a view to penetration to goal if they are to win the game. Diagram #3, below, provides an example of a game that helps build confidence with domination in the midfield third.

Diagram #3: Midfield Game to Foster Team-Play and Build Confidence

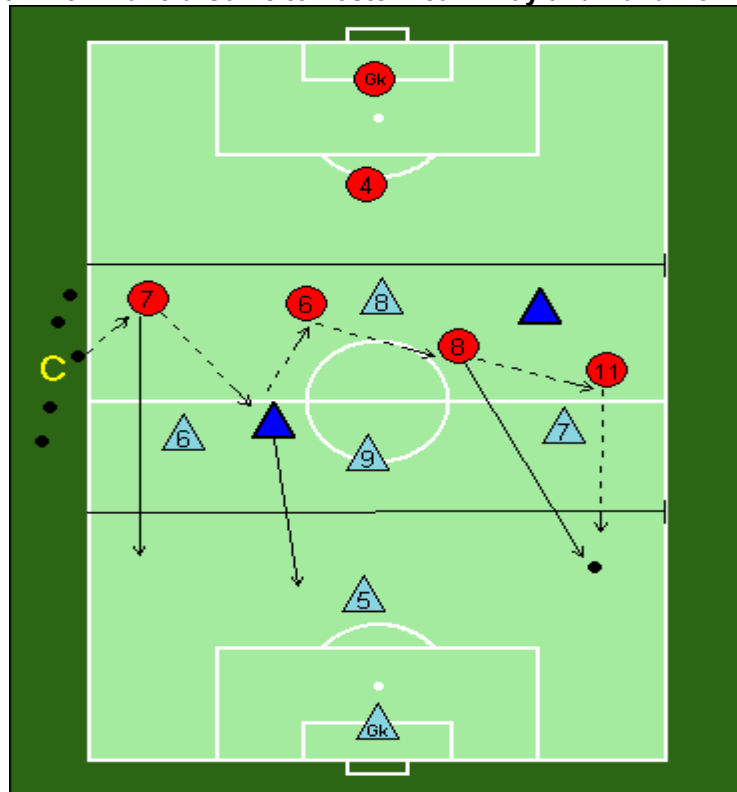


Diagram #3 Description: Play starts in the midfield third and uses the whole field. 4 versus 4 + 2 neutral players, possession should be maintained for at least 4 passes, and on the 4th pass 3 players may break out of the midfield zone towards their opponent's goal. 1 defender and a goalkeeper are waiting to defend their goal against the 3 attacking players. Progressions may be 2 touches, increased number of passes before attacking the goal or adding another defender. If the shot on goal is saved, the GK may deliver the ball directly to his team in the midfield third or use his back defender to assist. The attacking players must retreat into the midfield third. If the shot misses the goal then the coach restarts the exercise from the center line.

Relative to the other positions, midfielders need to be challenged to compete for the midfield space on the field and taught to dominate opponents for as long as possible during a game, just as we expect a forward to dominate the opposition defense to create scoring chances. Competitiveness can be encouraged over time with coaches guiding players through practices focused on making decisions that enable midfielders to keep the upper hand and fulfill their role for the duration of the game. All the while coaches should provide positive feedback for aggressive play.

Concluding Thoughts: Coaches Who Have Better Information Will Be Better Coaches

I hope that this article serves as a useful guide to coaches in providing a glimpse into the mindset of elite college soccer players. I am sharing the results with the soccer community in order to identify position-specific training tips and ideas that cater to players' development opportunities. These results and suggested ideas can serve as starting points for coaches to begin reflecting on the very specific needs of their players. I can't stress enough how important it is to understand the behaviors and attitudes of the players on your own team. By better understanding their individual characteristics, coaches can develop the best training programs specific to their players, and their team.