

**Perspectives on the US Youth Soccer
Olympic Development Program Player Evaluation Process
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During the Fall '07 season, OYSAN unveiled a new on-line Olympic Development Program player evaluation system; the first on-line ODP assessment tool utilized by a US Youth Soccer State Association. While the technical elements of the program exceeded expectations, confusion on the part of some recipients suggested that an explanation of the coach-player evaluation process was merited.

The following information relates to both specific aspects of the OYSAN assessment tool and to general considerations for any player evaluation process.

The Basics of Feedback

Providing feedback for growth and development is an important and necessary tool in any educational setting and there is particular value to providing 1) *evaluations of current ability* and 2) *prescriptions for maximizing potential* in the youth sport environment where motivated learners have the advantage of time – in years – to affect changes in performance.

Feedback is delivered from coaches to players in two basic forms.

1) *Informal feedback* is transmitted through positive, negative, or neutral comments; and through the coach's facial expressions, voice tone, and body language. Informal feedback can be offered before, during, or after training sessions and matches.

2) *Formal feedback* is generally provided to players through a written evaluation process.

Feedback is not one-directional from the coach to the players. Information is also relayed from the players to the coach by their attitudes, by their body language, by perceived understanding (performance), and through dialogue.

One of the motivations for writing this article was to acknowledge that feedback messages are often misinterpreted when the coaches and players have not developed a mutual understanding. Learning to communicate takes time, as does the trust required to change habits. While ODP coaches are generally able to establish their soccer credibility with players in relatively short order, the teaching process and the resulting changes in understanding and behavior can take much longer – even with willing participants.

“Catch Them Being Good”

Informal feedback during training sessions can be misinterpreted if the coach routinely uses the “Catch them being good” approach. This method was popularized by 1999 World Cup winning coach Tony DiCicco and the team's sport psychologist, Colleen Hacker, in their book of the same name. The method emphasizes praising players for

doing something well, or attempting something new or challenging, at the expense of correcting mistakes.

Taken at face value, the “Catch them being good” approach creates a more positive training atmosphere, but can also leave players with a false sense of accomplishment or standing if they are not directly helped to overcome their limitations.

In the club, high school, college, or representative team setting, there are many opportunities to schedule individual and team meetings to discuss the positives and negatives of training sessions and games. In the ODP selection environment, with very limited outside interaction between coaches and individual players, there can be a significant discrepancy between the informal feedback offered during training (praise) and the underlying message of the formal evaluation (not good enough).

On one level, ODP coaches want to conduct exciting training sessions that challenge players to independently think about the game in more sophisticated ways; on another, they have to offer constructive criticism to help players improve. Given the constraints of the ODP environment, coaches are encouraged to hedge towards the former.

Perspectives on ODP Evaluations

Formal assessment tools are important for a number of reasons.

- Periodic formal feedback is important for player development.
- Assessment tools challenge coaches to be more focused and watchful of player’s abilities and potential.
- Assessment tools drive instruction by influencing practice activities.
- Assessment tools influence the volume and content of feedback offered to players.
- Assessment tools serve to develop observational consistency throughout a coaching staff.
- Assessment tools challenge coaches to justify their selections in more objective terms.
- Assessment tools provide opportunities for both player and parent education.

While these reasons underpin the value and necessity of an assessment process, there are inherent cautions; one of which is that ODP evaluations can often be regarded as statements of fact. In reality, it is important to appreciate that the majority of ODP evaluations offer snapshots of current ability, rather than definitive commentary on a player’s standing and potential. While they are generally written in good faith to provide context to each player’s ODP experience, the process is not without its flaws. The following observations may be helpful in providing general insight into the formal evaluation process.

- 1) The initial selection goal of ODP is to assess each player’s soccer personality; in essence, asking what they are good at? Coaches first look for eye-catching qualities, such as technical proficiency, positional understanding, or a dominant physical trait.

- 2) The components of the evaluation challenge ODP coaches to assess a wide range of skills and abilities. This must be accomplished within a very limited number of observations and players do not always attend every session.
- 3) Accurately assessing a wide range of skills and abilities, and therefore each player's capacity and potential, requires multiple opportunities for coach-player interaction during training sessions. While it is relatively easy to assess what players currently understand, it is quite difficult to predict what they might be able to accomplish with proper training.
- 4) In order to facilitate the state team selection process, ODP training themes typically center around three broad aspects of soccer development: a) essential techniques, such as dribbling for possession, ball striking, and receiving; b) small-group attacking and defending tactics; and c) functional (positional) understanding. In contrast, a long-term player development program would structure training activities around the needs of individual players.
- 5) Players "with potential" who could blossom in a focused day-to-day training environment may well be overlooked during the ODP selection process. Sadly, OYSAN has an abundance of young athletes "with potential" who will never maximize their abilities because their training volume is too low and they do not work with competent coaches.
- 6) It is very difficult to assess a relatively large group of players over a wide range of abilities while conducting a training session. ODP coaches are often caught between the need to shape player understanding (active coaching) and evaluation.
- 7) There are no competitive games played during the fall season - in order to eliminate substitution and maximize practice and assessment opportunities. This decision is taken knowing full well that players perform differently in games and practices.
- 8) The volume of competitive games played during the winter season is also minimized in order to eliminate substitution and maximize practice and assessment opportunities. During the spring, state teams play more competitive games during the final teambuilding phase and while attending regional camp.
- 9) Because they will train more frequently and play competitive games, state team players who attend regional camp will receive more accurate evaluations than those whose ODP experience ends at the district or state pool levels.

Possession-oriented Soccer

The US Youth Soccer Olympic Development Program was created in 1977 to identify and develop players for the US National Teams program. When players first come into the ODP process, they arrive with established skills and attitudes and ideas about how the game is played. Very often, these ideas are at odds with the US National Team's

philosophy of possession-oriented soccer, which demands technical proficiency and positional understanding in order to control and change the rhythms of play.

Fundamentally, ODP players are asked to solve soccer problems by taking calculated risks; those who rely on size, speed, strength, and routinely kicking the ball forward, are often the most challenged by this approach. Players, who may be regarded as “talented” at the club level may struggle in an ODP environment because the style of play demands a more sophisticated understanding.

Positional Assignment

It is the ODP coach’s role to help players understand this vision of possession-oriented soccer through their training activities and by providing informal feedback. In the limited training time available, ODP coaches must assess each player’s soccer qualities and how they respond to training and feedback (assess potential). They must also match each player’s skill set and soccer personality to one or two positions, and this often results in players being asked to perform in unfamiliar roles.

Given that ODP is first and foremost a talent contest, the best players will play in their natural positions and the second tier players will be asked to fill the complementary or supporting roles. Those who can adapt increase their odds for survival, while the less versatile are more likely to be cut.

The Training-Observation-Training Cycle

There is a direct and circular relationship between coaching performance, player performance, and assessment. In training, the coach’s role is to broaden each player’s technical range and shape ideas about implementing a style of play. In games, the players have their opportunity to show what they have learned, which allows the coaches to assess how well they have instructed. Developmental age and game performance influence the choice of training activities and, over time, good coaches will positively impact individual ability and collective understanding.

The more time experienced coaches spend with players, the more familiar they will become with their personality and individual qualities. Over the course of a typical season, multiple games and practices provide opportunities for coaches to assess performance and plan remedial and developmental training activities.

In theory, the limited contact between ODP coaches and players means that the ODP evaluation can be less accurate than a fully-fledged annual or semi-annual assessment conducted at the club level by a professional coach. In reality, the quality and experience of the OYSAN staff serves to minimize this concern, but it is important to acknowledge that ODP is a fundamentally unique and different environment.

The Numbers Game

The ODP evaluation criteria were purposely created to reduce comparisons between players and to highlight areas for improvement. The four criteria are....

1 = Major playing strength; **2** = Well developed skill or concept; **3** = Can perform this skill or concept if given time and space; **4** = Still developing this skill or concept

..and the following points are worth noting.

First, the majority of scores on OYSAN player evaluations will be in the 2-4 range and very few players will receive scores of “1”. Typically, the more experienced the coach, the more discerning the scores will be (see point #5 below).

Second, it is a mistake to simply add up the scores on an ODP evaluation and quantify players by numerical score.

Third, it is only marginally more enlightening to note the trend of the scores. In theory, a player who has more 1’s and 2’s is probably better than someone who receives lots of 3’s and 4’s; however.....

Fourth, a player who has an exceptional quality – goal scoring or individual defending, for example - may not rate very highly across the range of assessment criteria and still make an ODP team. Representative soccer universally suffers from a dearth of personality or “specialist” players. While it is reasonable to assume that evaluation numbers correlate to ODP ability, it is unreasonable to surmise that someone with overall low scores is not an effective player, or that they won’t become a successful player in ODP, or elsewhere. This is particularly true of young adolescents who need time to grow into their bodies.

Fifth, the perspective of the assessors must be given context. OYSAN has approximately fifty “A” and “B” license coaches serving in ODP and coaching education, with a significant number of college and regional level coaches included in this cohort. A player who may be considered “talented” and “above average” by some, may rate as being quite limited by experienced coaches familiar with state and regional team standards. It is a fact of soccer life that experienced coaches will be more discriminating in their assessment of players and therefore more likely to assign scores of “3” (can perform this skill or concept if given time and space) or “4” (still developing this skill or concept) to “good” local players.

Finally, it is important to consider that ODP may be the first time a player has been in competition with his or her cohorts from around the state. For every young player, there is a point where technical performance and tactical awareness start to fail under pressure. From this perspective, a score of “3” or “4” on an evaluation may highlight the shortcomings of the local training environment as much as summarize the current developmental level of the player.

Formal Evaluation Schedule

ODP participants are provided with a formal written evaluation at pre-determined points in the seasonal year.

- Evaluations for non-high school players participating in the fall season are completed in late October / early November, providing the players have attended a minimum of three training sessions.
- Evaluations for state pool players competing during the winter months are completed at the end of March, providing the players have attended a minimum of three training sessions.
- Evaluations for state team alternates who do not attend the regional camp are completed in July.
- Evaluations for state team members are completed at the conclusion of the regional camp in July.

OYSAN's on-line process utilizes e-mail delivery. The regional player evaluation system is also expected to be on-line by summer 2009.

At the top youth clubs and at the youth professional level, it is regarded as a Best Practice for coaches to meet with each player and his or her parents at least once per year to formally discuss the player's progress and standing. In the ODP environment, a player-parent-coach meeting is not logistically possible; however, ODP coaches do meet with each individual state team player at the conclusion of regional camp, and are available via e-mail or phone to discuss contentious selection decisions and to elaborate on individual evaluations.

In Closing

ODP evaluations are coaching tools used to highlight player's strengths and weaknesses and prescribe areas for improvement towards possible advancement to state, regional, or national teams.

It is estimated that "expert performers" require around 10,000 hours of training to reach elite status. The maximum contact time any ODP coach will have with any player from September to July is 60 hours. While every ODP player's tactical and positional understanding and speed of play will be improved by some measure during this time, permanently changing playing habits requires a consistent coaching message and a fertile soccer environment. Additionally, technical development is clearly a long-term process that is the primary responsibility of the individual players.

The reality of player development is that there is nothing an ODP coach can accomplish in 60 contact hours that will compensate for a sub-par soccer environment or the willingness of individual players to engage in "homework" with the ball. Simply, players who work towards maximizing their talents with the ball are more likely to flourish; and good players who train with and against other good players under a good coach will advance faster and further.