

Where Should Players Play?

by Robert Parr

The offseason is a time of change for most players and teams. Some players will leave the team while others will arrive, and those who return may well come back in very different conditions. Some will have recovered from injury, some will have used their offseason time to focus on individual needs, and others will have allowed themselves to lose fitness during the break. Thus, at the start of each new season, coaches typically find themselves working with a different mix of players than they had at the end of the prior season, which means they are once again faced with the question of where to play their players.

As you prepare for your first matches of the year, consider the following questions to help with your decisions regarding lineups and substitution patterns...

Where does your team fit into the developmental lifecycle for each player? If you coach a very young team, then you can stop with this question, as each player needs the opportunity to play at every position when he is just beginning to learn the game. For teams that are early in the developmental stages, the coach's task is to foster the individual growth of each player. Thus, playing players in their "optimum" positions has little meaning, since development must be prioritized higher than winning individual contests. On the other hand, intermediate- and advanced-level players will have reached the stage where their continued development requires some degree of specialization, so read on if you coach at these levels.

Where have your players played before? This is the logical place to start as you sort through your roster. If a player played in the midfield last year, then he will likely be comfortable playing there again this season. With that said, you should recognize that last year's roster had different needs from this year's edition, and thus some players likely played someplace other than their "natural" roles. In most cases, goalkeepers will be separated out from this calculation. However, you will also want to consider whether someone new should be trained as a keeper (perhaps as a backup option to your primary keeper), or whether one of the keepers on your roster will be able to help you as a field player.

What are the natural tendencies of each player? Each person will have natural preferences that can guide you in your allocation of roles. For example, some players prefer to dribble whereas others prefer to pass. Some players defend with self-control and patience, while others tend to be more reckless with their challenges. Allow your players to play in a variety of unstructured scrimmages (both small-sided and full-sided) early in your season and observe their natural patterns. If some players consistently "hang back", then you should consider them as likely defenders. If others consistently line up on the wings (and not in the middle), then you probably don't want to play them as central

midfielders. Spending time in preseason making observations like these will go a long way toward solving your positional puzzles!

What are the core strengths and weaknesses of each player? To understand your options better, take some time to evaluate the physical, technical, and tactical abilities of each of your players in detail. Consider a full range of attributes as you perform this analysis -- no single player will excel at all components of the game, so you need to identify what things make each player "special" and what weaknesses their teammates will have to help cover.

What are the demands of each position or role? Once you have a feel for the abilities of your players, you'll need to look at the problem from the opposite angle. Map out your preferred system of play, and list as many specific attributes required to succeed at each position within this system. For example, wing midfielders should be able to play in transition, deliver long services from the wing, take players on 1v1, and sustain a high work rate for the duration of the game. Center backs will need to be comfortable using both feet, be strong in the air, and have good defensive and organizational skills. Strikers must create and score goals with regularity. You should be able to elaborate further on these and other roles, so think carefully about the nature of each position when you compile your summary.

Once you've assembled this data, you'll be ready to start assigning possible roles to each player on your roster. Countless numbers of players--at all levels--have moved from one role to the next with great success, so don't feel constrained to play someone in a specific position just because that's what was done in the past. Some players will stand out as obvious choices to play certain places, so you can allocate their roles first and then continue experimenting with specific choices for the other players.

Do you have players who "connect" well with each other? Many positions have natural pairings that will influence how effective your players will be in these roles. For example, strikers need to play off of each other to create scoring chances. If you play with a sweeper, you'll need someone in that role who has the confidence of your goalkeeper (and vice versa). Central midfielders must work together to maintain possession and build the attack, and defenders must coordinate their actions to constantly cover for one another. The twin pillars of team chemistry--friendship and respect--can be crucial factors when placing players in these types of pairings.

How does each player's psychological composition affect his role? Each position has unique psychological demands, and you need to factor this in to your selections. For example, successful strikers must have a mentality that keeps them in the game even when all previous attacking efforts have been thwarted; they can't dwell on past miscues, or they won't be prepared to capitalize on the next opportunity. Similarly, goalkeepers must be able to stay focused for long stretches of time without touching the ball, and then come up with key saves in an instant (often in rapid succession).

What happens when you make substitutions? Not every player can be in your starting lineup, so you need to understand which players will perform better coming off the bench. If you have a player who can give you a boost late in the game but doesn't have the stamina to play full matches, work with him to ensure that he embraces the role of "super sub" when you ask him to fill this role. In addition, you'll need to experiment with options that allow you to keep a reasonably-strong lineup on the field even after you substitute for some of your starters. In some cases, you'll find that your best "overall" lineup is not the best "starting" lineup. If you choose to maintain balance through substitutions, discuss your reasoning with those players who aren't in your starting lineup (but would have been otherwise) so they understand your tactical decision and stay mentally engaged.

After you go through this initial analysis, you may well find that you don't have the right mix of personnel to play your preferred system. In this case, you will need to look closely at alternate systems of play that may be more favorable for the players on your roster.

Note that the approach outlined above assumes you have a roster that is essentially "fixed", and thus you need to deploy the personnel you have in the best possible manner. Although some coaches will be in a situation where they can obtain new personnel to fill key gaps (through recruiting or advancing players from a developmental team), most coaches do not have this luxury. Further, every team will have a time when its roster is frozen, making these considerations relevant to all coaches.