

**READING THE PLAY IN TEAM SPORTS – YES, IT IS
TRAINABLE!
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One of the great coaching debates concerns whether the ability to read the play in team sports is innate or trainable. Coaches describe the skill as the player who is a good driver in heavy traffic, the player who seemingly knows what is going to happen next - two passes before it happens. While they may not be the fastest around the court or field, their ability to forecast accurately a game's future means that they always have all the time in the world. By now you will have visualised players such as basketballer Andrew Gaze, AFL (Australian Football League) footballer James Hird, netballer Natalie Avelino or rugby union fly-half Stephen Larkham.

For many of us mere mortals, reading the play is more akin to reading Latin and it seems to reinforce the notion that it cannot be trained. However, while some players will always be obviously better than others, there is now a great deal of evidence to suggest that players *can* learn to read the play – just as you can learn to read Latin.

In scientific terminology, 'reading the play' refers to pattern recall or recognition. Watching a team sport like netball is a classic example of watching a continuously changing pattern. Interestingly, while the pattern may look meaningless to the untrained eye, that is fourteen players sprinting and dodging in all directions, to an expert player (or coach) it can all look completely logical and can inform them in advance as to where the ball is about to be passed. This is quite a handy skill to have if your job requires you to intercept as many opposition passes as possible – just ask Liz Ellis.

What has chess got to do with team sports?

Pattern recall was first investigated in the game of chess. Research was able to demonstrate that grandmasters could sum up a board in one glance. When they were provided with five to ten seconds to look over a specific chess situation, the best players could accurately recall the exact location of ninety percent of the pieces. Lesser skilled players could only remember fifty percent. The researchers concluded that the grandmasters could 'chunk' the pieces on the board into fewer, larger chunks of

information that were more easily remembered and subsequently recalled to produce the required pattern, in much the same manner as we all remember frequently used telephone numbers as one block of numbers rather than as eight individual numbers.

Sports science has demonstrated that elite team-sport players also possess the analytical mind of a chess master. For example, research has identified that elite players have developed the ability to rapidly recognise and then memorise patterns of play executed by their opponents. Importantly, this capability is not because the elite players have a bigger memory capacity than the rest of us – that is, it is not innate. Rather, their memory of sport-specific strategies is simply more detailed than ours and develops further through years of practice and experience.

Pattern recall research in sport can be illustrated in netball, where the recall ability of the Australian team through to U17 talent identification squad members has been examined. Presented with video footage of netball game situations, the players had approximately ten seconds to view a piece of play before the video was stopped. They were then required to recall the attacking and defensive structures of the two teams by plotting, on a blank diagram of a netball court, the location of each player as they had last seen them in the video clip. On average, the Australian players were able to recall accurately the location of 72% of all players. In comparison, Australian Institute of Sport players recalled 62%, while the U19 and U17 squads recalled approximately 57%. Such results illustrate the contribution of reading the play to the make-up of our elite team-sport players.

So how can it be trained?

Researchers have interviewed some of sport's great decision makers, consistently finding that they engaged in extensive team-based game play as children, be it in their back yards or with others at the local park (for example, two-on-two street basketball). They also played a variety of team sports before specialising in the sport that they made their profession. For example, expert AFL decision-makers tend to have played significant amounts of basketball in addition to football. It has been reasoned that by playing similar 'invasion' sports, they were constantly learning to read patterns based around the fundamental team-sport concept of creating time and space.

Obviously, the more games you play, the more likely you are to become accustomed to specific attacking and defensive strategies and to develop an understanding of where the ball will be passed. Whether a player then becomes a skilled decision-maker relates to whether his (or her) coach draws that player's attention to such details. Coaches, who provide their players with game-based training opportunities rather than stereotypical drills with minimal decision-making requirements, are likely to develop more competent decision-makers. To quote AFL coaching legend, Dave Parkin: "Players need to bring their brain to training."

Reading the play can also be developed off-field by asking players to predict what will happen next when watching televised matches. Rather than simply watching, players have to put themselves in the shoes of the experts and answer questions such as, ‘Where should the ball be passed next?’ and, ‘Where should the support runners run to?’

Test your players’ pattern recall skill.

Pattern recall ability is one skill in which your players can easily be tested in a club setting.

1. Videotape a selection of elite-level games of your sport from television.
2. Draw to scale a blank version of your playing field or court.
3. Select passages of play that contain structure and then show approximately ten seconds of the play to allow the players to get a feel for the scenario before quickly stopping the tape.
4. The players’ task is exactly as described in the previous netball research example. Test the players in a variety of situations that occur in a match. For example, stop a tape of Australian football just as the fullback prepares to kick the ball into play. The footage shown from behind the goal often provides an excellent perspective of the patterns that a fullback is attempting to read.

Conclusion.

While there will always be some players with a greater ability to read the play, it is a skill that is primarily developed through quality coaching. To use an analogy from strength training, you cannot expect to make significant gains in muscular strength if you do not do a systematic weights program, manipulating the variables of volume, intensity, frequency and overload. Likewise, players will not develop decision-making skills if their coaches only proscribe practice drills that are devoid of any decision-making opportunities. There must be a systematic application of game-based practice activities that require players to make decisions as required in game situations.

Suggested reading.

Abernethy, B, Cote, J, and Baker, J 2002. Expert decision-making in team sports, report on research commissioned by Australian Sports Commission.

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Merrick, E and Farrow, D 2000. 'Coaching Decision-Making in Soccer: a Constraints-Lead Approach.' *Insight*, 2(3): 48-51.