

# A BEST PRACTICE MODEL OF PLAYER ASSESSMENT AND RECRUITMENT IN PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL

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## Abstract

### Aim of Paper

“The ability of top-level football coaches to identify true talent is a highly sought-after quality that ensures clubs or national teams do not lose time, money and prestige by investing in the wrong players” (Christensen, 2009: 366). In professional football, the recruitment of playing talent, either internally via the trainee system or externally via the transfer system and, regardless of the considerable fees that may be involved, is a prime measure of managerial acumen. Based on semi-structured tape recorded interviews with twenty-five players, five agents and twenty managers, this paper proposes a best practice model for the assessment and recruitment of professional football players. This best practice model (Smith & Stewart, 1999) may be used in an attempt to reduce the uncertainty involved in the recruitment of players in general and foreign players in particular. Arguably, this model provides a framework in which a more holistic, multi-disciplinary perspective is adopted which clubs and managers may utilise to more reliably inform their player recruitment decisions.

### Organisational/managerial context

While most UK based clubs remain focused on youth development, some have placed a greater emphasis on the recruitment of cheaper, more experienced players from abroad (Walters & Rossi, 2009). Player assessment is an ongoing process of evaluating players – current and prospective – who demonstrate appropriate levels of performance for inclusion in the first team squad. This is a multi-faceted approach involving the systematic assessment of football players from anthropometric, physiological, psychological and sociological perspectives. In addition, computerised systems such as “Computer Coach” (Boon & Sierskma, 2003: 278), player quality indexes based on observable player characteristics and, actual game statistics such as the Opta index may also be used. In addition to a player’s on-field performance, managers may also have a list of desirable characteristics when recruiting or assessing players (Reilly & Williams, 2003). For example, a player’s willingness to learn, professional attitude, mental strength, dedication and work

ethic may also play a significant role in the judgment made about current and/or prospective players (Reilly & Williams, 2003; Christensen, 2009).

### Organisational/managerial practice/issues

Traditionally, football scouts and managers have subjectively assessed and recruited professional football players based on their intuition and gut feeling (Christensen, 2009). Based on the data gathered in this research, professional football manager’s still utilise traditional methods of player assessment. In this regard, perhaps professional football managers could adopt –in addition to intuition and gut feeling– more rational, scientific methods of player assessment in guiding their player recruitment decisions. What is particularly evident from this research is the central role that a players’ lifestyle and off-field behaviour plays in the recruitment and assessment process. Thus, building on previous academic research on player assessment in general and player recruitment in particular, this model attempts to provide a more holistic approach to player recruitment. In addition and, in an attempt to ensure greater coherence between theory and practice, this model has been reviewed and assessed by a number of UK Premier League clubs, sports scientists, managers and coaches in professional football.

### Implications for sport and sport management

The implications for professional football clubs in general and football managers in particular are clear. Firstly, in addition to more traditional methods of player assessment and recruitment, football managers should adopt more rational scientific methods. Secondly, information relating to a players’ lifestyle and off-field behaviour should be given greater importance in guiding player recruitment decisions. In this regard, the proposed model could serve as a useful framework in alleviating the uncertainty surrounding the recruitment of football players in general and foreign players in particular. This could lead to more optimal spending of money and assist in reducing the possibility of making poor player recruitment decisions. Arguably, this conceptual model could also facilitate better player management decisions in other professional sport organisations

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