

The Creative Ingredients

The desire to produce more young creative English players is widely shared. But do coaches actually know what they are looking for when we talk of creativity? *Nick Levett*, FA National Development Manager (Youth and Mini-Soccer) offers some guidance.



"Who has a different view to other people? Who offers something that others haven't considered?"





One of the most common complaints I hear up and down the country is the distinct lack of creative players possessing an English passport.

However, whilst we talk a lot about wanting to develop creative players, the real question is what do they look like and how do we foster these traits on the grass?

I'm going to start by sharing some findings from a research study to help our understanding of just what it is we should be looking for within our children and I'll attempt to add the football architecture to the plot.

Associative orientation: The people with creative talents may well be more imaginative, playful and have a wealth of different ideas. They have an ability to be committed yet slide transitions between fact and fiction.

In the football world, have you come across the player that wants to talk about lots of different ways to approach things? The ones that when you show them a tactics board will move all the counters, proudly saying "...and then he could run here, and she could pass the ball down to him, and he could run into there and cross it here...." – recognise those ones? Try not to miss the conversations these players are starting. Whilst they might not be what you want at that time and a little frustrating, they are sharing a unique insight into the creativity of their mind.

Need for originality: The creative ones will often resist rules and convention; not sticking to what is expected. Some really creative people will have a rebellious attitude because of a need to do things no one else does.

When you are setting up a practice and the focus of learning is on a particular skill, there is often a player who doesn't want to do that one, they want to make up their own trick and try something different - can you think of many players that do this? Commonly this is where the best and newest ideas come from. The Cruyff turn? Ronaldo's free-kick technique? Ideas developed through play and exploration then honed through practice.

Motivation: Creative people have a need to perform, are incredibly goal oriented and possess an innovative attitude. They often have the staying power and stamina to tackle difficult issues.

Matchday comes around, you've been working in training during the week on 'when to pass and when to dribble' yet all of this seems lost as Mr. Creative decides to try and take on two players in the middle of the pitch, loses the ball and the other team score. I think we have all been there. Our immediate reaction as a rational adult is 'have they not learnt anything this week' but for that player, they were just having a go at something new. Rather than worry about the score as the outcome, engage them in a conversation on performance and allow them to start making the links.

Ambition: The people with bundles of creativity have a need to be influential, to attract attention and recognition.

As an adult it is very easy to confuse a player's need to be influential with one who is 'showing off' and one who likes to be the centre of attention. Transfer this across different domains and think about the school environment and how things are seen differently through the eyes of the music teacher, drama teacher or art teacher. What does a creative child look like there? They may showcase their talents in a very different way and often the very best in those domains are not the showing off types. In a football sense, try and spot the players in your group that like to try different ideas and those that aren't afraid of getting it wrong in front of others. Under the surface their brain may be calculating different ways to make that attempt better.

Flexibility: Creative brains have the ability to see different aspects of issues and come up with optimal solutions.

Coaches have the ability to facilitate learning across a multitude of different levels. Helping players get better at football is one way but also helping them become better people is vitally important too. The way you structure your coaching can help promote this. For example, when splitting the team into small groups to develop tactics and strategies and to problem solve, consider the outcomes closely. Certainly there are the specific football parts that will be developed but it's vital you listen to the process as much as the outcome. Who has a different view to other people? Who offers something that others haven't considered? Who views the problem from a different perspective to other people? They might be your creative talents.

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Low emotional stability: Creative people have a tendency to experience negative emotions, greater fluctuations in moods and emotional state and a failing self-confidence.

There is no denying it, the most talented players of different generations are often the flawed genius, bringing with them challenges in other areas of their life, compensated by wild extremes. Do you recognise this in some of your players? Many of these traits are associated with different ages and stages of maturation, but sometimes there is a knock-on effect to our coaching style also. How do we manage these young people? There is a great saying that coaches need to adjust their style of delivery to the learner, not the learner needing to adjust to them. Some players require an arm round the shoulder at times and if our default style is a little more towards the other end of the spectrum it is important we recognise this.

Low sociability: The most creative have a tendency not to be very considerate, are often obstinate and will find faults and flaws in ideas and people.

The creative ones will view a problem through a different lens to the other children, not in a 'concrete sequential' kind of manner, but with more 'random and abstract' thinking. If they don't see their team mates sorting out a challenge in a way that they would, they will often demonstrate frustration and criticise the plan, especially if they consider their ideas to be better. Managing this in terms of developing their people skills is important, helping them understand that listening to different views can be beneficial and it shows good emotional intelligence and empathy towards other people.

As you will notice, some of these traits sound positive, such as the motivation, but others can sound hard work within a team environment. The challenge for you as a coach is to recognise these exist and then manage them, not stifle their creativity. Managing your own frustrations is an important part and understand that by setting the right environment, you have the ability to foster some absolute creative geniuses, maybe not in the professional football sphere, but in their wider life. And that is really important.

