

the game • Comment



Unlocking of the mind's potential could be the next frontier for coaching

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Imagine that you are a central defender. Eden Hazard has just cut inside your right back, he's at the top right corner of your penalty area and he about to take you on. At this stage, if you are like most footballers, what you do next will be determined by a combination of instinct, experience, an awareness of where your team-mates and Hazard's team-mates are and your natural attributes.

When you think about what is going on neurophysiologically, it is pretty remarkable. In a split second, your brain processes all these inputs and figures out the best course of action.

But what if, in addition to those inputs, your brain had other factors to consider? What if it knew that, in those situations — taking into account the position of his team-mates and the other defenders, as well as the score in the game — Hazard went to his left 70 per cent and, only 30 per cent did he choose another option?

Would it give you an edge? Of course it would. Now, that information about Hazard's tendencies is available. In this age of performance analysis, most top clubs have someone who can call it up on his smartphone in a matter of seconds. The problem is that it is not being implanted in players' brains. At best, this data is used at a macro level by managers who draw up tactical plans to take this data into account. At worst, it never makes the leap from the hard drive to the manager.

Of course, players already have a virtual database of information. It is called experience. It forms the basis of their decision-making. In fact, players described as being able to "read a game" or who possess a "football brain" either have more experience or are better at processing those inputs.

A while ago I spoke to a well-known manager who was once a very gifted footballer. He said that he was most frustrated by players who just could not see things on the pitch, such as the way

an opponent defended or the runs that a team-mate made. "To me it came naturally, to some it doesn't," he said.

Does it come naturally? How well an individual processes the inputs and how quickly they can act on them is probably innate. But the quality of those inputs is not. That is learnt over time. What if, in addition to the information a player learns organically on the pitch, there was a way to convey that other information, such as Hazard's tendencies, as well? Someone cannot become more "intelligent" but with greater knowledge they can develop into a better player.

Here is a different analogy. Imagine the player with a good "football brain" as a Lamborghini and the ordinary player as a Ford Escort. All things being equal, the former will outperform the latter. But if the former uses standard petrol and the latter high-octane fuel — useful data that can be processed — then the gap between the two narrows.

"You'd like to teach them," the manager told me. "But how are you supposed to do that? The only way is over time, by repetition. And we only get a couple of training sessions a week during the season." He then proceeded to describe all the individual statistics and performance data his club created and how difficult it was to make it relevant to his players. Just like the "excellent and comprehensive" scouting reports he received on his next opponents. They were wonderfully detailed and his staff distilled them into easily digestible individualised reports for each of his players.

"Which is another way of saying you're dumbing them down to two or three concepts," he said. "You just don't have the time to use this stuff to its full potential. Not because the players are thick, but rather because they're not conditioned to take this stuff on board."

Performance-analysis types talk about the importance of gaining an edge, even if it is just a few percentage points. It is fair enough that players are unused to being given this data. And, in fact, among many in football there is still a sense that with many players you do not want to "give them too much to think about". Yet what if from the age of 16 customised prep work was part of a footballer's routine? If someone can be taught how to absorb information better — specifically the data which an assistant coach or scout prepares on a DVD — can it give them an edge and make them a better footballer?

My hunch is that it can. Just as proper advance scouting helps clubs to prepare better for an opponent tactically, in terms of formation and style, surely it can do the same on an individual level. It will take time, of course, but this unlocking of the mind's potential could be the next coaching frontier.