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by Herb Greenberg

The Psychology of the *Winner*

Figuring out whether players have what it takes is the perennial question that keeps scouts, coaches and general managers awake at nights. Before each draft, they wonder whether certain players have that seemingly indefinable something that can take their talent beyond high school or college. The odds are enormous. That is what has traditionally made draft choices a professional guessing game.

There are about 20,000 college basketball players, of whom less than 400 get to appear in showcase scrimmages leading to the selection of players for the National Basketball Association (NBA) draft. Virtually all are leading scorers, team captains, even all-Americans. From this extremely talented group, 54 are drafted, and perhaps another half-dozen are signed as free agents.

So, three-tenths of one percent of the 20,000 college athletes are eventually chosen each year for the NBA. Of this elite 60, just a

choice few have solid NBA careers, let alone go on to become stars. The same odds are against making it in professional baseball, football and hockey.

The reason it is so hard to tell if someone can succeed in the pros is because it is so difficult to know the hidden factors underlying an athlete's character and motivation. It is precisely these hidden variables that differentiate the individual who can maximize his talent from one who never will live up to his potential.

The reality is that, more often than not, a standout high school or college athlete has no one to really challenge his abilities. So, talent alone can carry such a player at this level. He simply can out-gun the competition through sheer talent, but his true inner character often remains hidden and untested.

Only when an athlete is on a professional playing field, up against someone with equal or superior talents, can these questions be answered. His true inner strengths, limitations and motivations come to the surface at this time. By then, of course, the athlete has already been drafted and a mistake may have been made. High school and college success do not necessarily translate to comparable performance on the major league level.

Winning Qualities

In our psychological assessments of more than 4,000 athletes in baseball, basketball, football and hockey over the past seven years, we have found that those who make it in the pros all possess three essential qualities. They are self-disciplined, competitive, and have a positive sense of themselves. These are the qualities that make up what we call “the psychology of a winner.” Depending upon the position, a player will need other attributes, but a serious lack of these three will keep an individual’s potential from being realized.

Self-esteem. How a person deals with failure can determine whether he succeeds. This is particularly important for a new draft choice, whose high school or college career invariably has been one long string of successes. Will he be able to pick himself up from the inevitable set-backs?

For instance, the league’s leading hitter in baseball most likely will fail to hit safely two out of three times. Even the best shooters in basketball usually don’t hit much more than 50% of their shots from the field. The top quarterbacks throw their share of incomplete passes and interceptions.

If an individual has good self-esteem, he will view these failures as nothing more than an inevitable part of the game. If a person does not fully believe in his real worth, if he is lacking in self-confidence, he probably will get down on himself in the face of failure. It will be viewed as psychological proof of some hidden inadequacies. Someone who does not have a good sense of self begins with the fundamental assumption that he is not really that good, that he is covering up deficiencies that are bound to seep through sooner or later.

Anyone who follows sports can recall a “phenom” who hit over .400 during spring training, then was cut from the roster a month later, never to be heard of again. We can remember the wide receiver who made seemingly impossible catches, then dropped the ball or fumbled in the most crucial situations. These are but a few examples of what can result from negative self-esteem. Such players actually psych themselves out of the major leagues.

Competitiveness probably is the most used - or perhaps the most abused - word in the language of sports. Of course, every athlete wants to win in a very personal way, but it is really more than a “want.” It is the burning desire to take that last buzzer-beating shot or face the best hitter with the bases loaded. Competitiveness involves immediacy. You see the competitive athlete diving for balls, sliding hard into bases, simply doing anything that needs to be done to win with each play.

The competitive athlete is very likely to achieve not only up to his level of talent, but beyond it. He simply is not willing to be limited by his talents, but constantly is driven to maximize what he does, and so, invariably, he will do more than otherwise might be expected.

Self-discipline is the inner motivation, the built-in taskmaster, that drives someone to do what has to be done to succeed. It is the inner drive that causes an athlete to get to practice early, to stay in top condition during the off-season, to devote the extra hours needed for improvement, and to do all of this because he wants to, not because a coach or manager makes him.

Once a self-disciplined athlete learns a new technique or play, he will practice it until it becomes part of his automatic system. Naturally, some learn more quickly than others, but if that player is self-disciplined, when something is learned it will become part of him, not simply an ability that he taps into once in a while.

him, we told our client that we felt Douglas would be an outstanding leader and possessed all of the competitiveness, self-discipline, judgement, and team orientation needed by a point guard. As it turned out, the Miami Heat drafted Douglas at the top of the second round, he was an all-rookie selection and now is a member of the Celtics after a trade to Boston. His attributes more than made up for any slowness or lack of height.

In another instance, one of our football client teams was considering a trade. The player in question had been in the league a number of years, and they thought he might be a starter for them. Our client team was about to offer a first-round draft choice for him because they had a need to fill the position. After assessing him, we suggested strongly that either they shouldn't make the deal at all or certainly offer no more than a low-draft choice because we had serious doubts as to whether he would meet their need adequately. The team heeded our advice, managed to get the player much more cheaply, and ultimately found that he was no more than barely adequate.

As a final example, one of our first sports clients provided us with a situation that had an interesting twist. The director of player personnel for a baseball team asked us to assess and consult with him on five "problem players" in the club's minor league system. We were able to describe specific difficulties, and provide a helpful diagnosis for two of the individuals, while advising that the team drop or trade the other two players as quickly as possible. In the fifth case, we said that we could see no problems. Rather, that player looked to us like someone who would play up to or even beyond his level of talent and would be an asset to any team. If he had a problem, we said, we just could not see it. As it turned out, this individual was thrown in as a ringer. He actually was a model player, and has developed exactly at the accelerated pace we said he would.

Can assessment of self-esteem, competitiveness, and self-discipline actually predict performance? A study was put together wherein four experts - Harry Weltman, former general manager of three major league basketball teams; Donny Walsh, general manager of the Indiana Pacers; Gene Shue, general manager of the Philadelphia 76ers; and Pete Newell,

former coach and general manager - evaluated basketball players who we had initially assessed for the draft over the last six years. Of the 37 players Caliper recommended, these experts judged five to be superstars, 18 as above average players, and only one as performing below expectations.

On the other hand, of those players we did not recommend - who we felt would not live up to their potential because they lacked some of the essential qualities we discussed earlier - none were considered superstars, only two became solid players, 25 were deemed journeymen, and 49 were labeled unsuccessful. It is important to note that these experts assessed the players' over-all careers, while our evaluations of the players were conducted before these athletes had one minute of playing time in the NBA.

The second part of the study involved a comparison of statistics between the group we recommended and those who were not recommended but were drafted anyway. The former averaged 909 points per player per season compared to 376 for the non-recommended. The recommended group out-rebounded the not-recommended 320 to 160. The recommended blocked 51 shots per player per season, compared to 23; averaged 207 assists, compared to 91; and averaged 77 steals, compared to 33. Finally, in minutes played per season, the recommended group averaged 1,919 compared to 1,004 by those who lacked the key psychological dynamics, according to our assessments.

These results, together with hundreds of case histories, clearly point out that the dynamics, character, inner drive and motivation make the crucial difference when drafting professional players. Obviously, talent comes first. However, teams that look beyond observable physical ability and assess these harder-to-measure character issues are those that will avoid costly mistakes and improve their ability to select the best and most productive players.

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