

Pattern Recognition in Soccer: Perceptions of Skilled Players and Experienced Coaches

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The ability to perceive and recognise patterns of play is important for skilled performance in sporting environments with strict spatiotemporal constraints. An extensive body of laboratory-based experimental research has examined pattern recognition, yet there has been a lack of qualitative investigations into pattern recognition underpinning skilled performance. We interviewed six skilled soccer defenders and seven experienced coaches to investigate the perceived importance of pattern recognition to 'game reading' in soccer and its development in practice. A two-stage reflexive thematic analysis identified seven higher-order and twenty-two lower-order themes relating to the contribution of pattern recognition to game reading in competition and practice. Participants reported that danger and distances, visual perception, anticipation, experience, opposition team, organisation and communication, and development in practice were deemed fundamental to performance in competition. Participants explained that developing pattern recognition skills in representative practice environments supported transfer of these skills into competition. Defenders and coaches emphasised the importance of distance between player and ball, as well as identifying 'triggers' which appear linked to a defender's experience, positional awareness, and organisational skills. Providing defenders with representative scenarios during practice is recommended to stimulate problem-solving and promote familiarity with an opposition team's patterns of play to support skilled performance.