How To Evaluate Talent – Part 2 - By Rob Meurs

By Rob Meurs

In the second part of his article "How to evaluate talent" Rob Meurs focuses on the feel for the game and the skill level of the young player.

Feel for the game

A key aspect of identifying talent is looking for players who have a feel for the game. Feel for the game is not only the feel a player must have to make the best decisions, find the best solutions in a split second and understanding the plays, but also to know himself, what he can do and what he can't do on the court and knowing your own teammates and your opponents.

How many times a coach gets frustrated because his big guy wants to play PG and starts to dribble the ball and screwing up plays. Or the defensive specialist who also wants to show he can score and misses one shot after the other. Or the wing who is open and takes a 3 pointer while he can't throw a rock in the ocean, not realizing the leave him open because he can't shoot. For scouts and coaches it's important to know if the player can play within his limitations and if not can it be fixed.

Knowing your teammates strengths and weaknesses, his mood and if he is in the game or not. A playmaker who passes the ball to his big man who is posting at the left block, but who can't make a post move from the

left block. Or the PG who sees his wing player is in the game and can't miss and will get him the ball all the time. Or the passer who sees that his teammate is within his shooting range and gets him the ball.

Especially in the NBA, but also at the top level in Europe the real good players do know all the strengths and weaknesses of their direct opponent, they study it and take advantage of it. I remember Chris Mullin with the Warriors, he could tell you exactly of all his opponents what their go to moves were, which angles they prefer, if they shot higher percentages from the left or the right side and so on. A player like Jason Kidd goes even a step further, he also knows of the defenders of his team mates what they can and can't do and used that to get his own players in the game and in higher percentage plays. Some players are great in recognizing mismatches and used that to their or their teammate's advantage.

Understanding of set plays and concepts of the game and know how to anticipate. Don't try to make every pass an assist, but look for the pass which can lead to an assist. Try to open up the defense with strong outside plays, so your big man comes open. When to run which play, see and take the right options. Remember the plays, but don't let it become completely automatic. Here we come to the creativity of a player, what has a lot to do with his skill level, but also finding solutions and the right decision in not prepared situations. Timing, angles and taking responsibility to do it different. Playing with the clock and possessions.

It's obvious that the position of the player has also to do a lot with his feel for the game and what will be expected from him. Play makers almost have to be an extension of the coach and have a lot of responsibility in decision making; beside they have the ball more in their hands than any other player. They are the start of a sequence of actions and plays which will lead to a basket. The big inside player is at the receiving end has to know when and where to post up and then decides which post move will be the best in that situation, but hardly has to think about other teammates even when it would benefit him.

Feel for the game has to do with cognitive and creative decisions, which partly can be taught, but also can be natural. It has to do with experience and age, but also with (basketball) IQ and brain models. The more a player has been in different situations the more he recognizes and knows how to solve it (in less time). Quickness of decisions is very important. Younger players are thinking and take more time to find (the right) solution, you see them looking for a decision and then become too late with their action. Same for players coming from a lower level of competition, they also need time to adjust to the quicker pace of the game. The faster the game the more complicated it will become for inexperienced players.

It's not always easy for coaches and scouts to recognize if a player has feel for the game and for which part, how much, did he made the right decision, can it become better, does he has basketball IQ, were there other factors involved in his decision, etc. It takes more time then for instance evaluating the physical talent of the player, which you know in couple of seconds/minutes. You have to see him longer and in more different situations. As a scout and coach you have to really understand the game yourself and then try to think in the place of the player you scout. Would I do the same, look at the results of the actions, could he have done better, did his teammates understood, did the coach want him to play in a certain way, were the officials a factor, is he making the same bad decision over and over again, etc. Also external factors, what happened before the game, is his wife pregnant, did they pay him in time, how much pressure is there on the result of the game. Personality of a player, is he shy or not, ego, does he take risks, does he feel responsibility, can he communicate, are factors influencing his decision making. How does he come out of a time out? Does he pick up instructions of his coach or team mates? Does he communicate with his coach? Is he explaining plays options etc to a team mate? Will he watch games on pc or DVD? What does he do during practice, does he listen and then try to do it different, will he ask the coach to explain, is he picking up the board and draws something?

More than physical talent and for sure mental talent, feel for the game and making the right decisions can be trained till a certain extent, it's not easy and it will take time. Some players will never become good decision makers others can improve a lot, but in general they all will become at least a little better if it wasn't only for making the same bad mistakes over and over again. Experience is the key word, rehearsal, put the player and the team in many different situations, make them think, asked them for solutions, give them simple instructions, let them watch their own games and those from others and so on.

There are several different learning models and strategies which I don't want to go over in this article. One thing I like to mention is a cognitive computer program what has been used for the training of fighter pilots in Israel and has been translated to the basketball situation. In a very simple computer game (not a basketball game) the players learn to anticipate, make split second decisions, recognize situations, oversee complicated situations etc. The program makes the game more difficult when the player shows improvement. Why I mention it is not in particular the program, but more the concept of cognitive learning in basketball and how you can have more learning moments then just during the hours of practicing with the team and even more important it's possible the to improve decision making of basketball players.

Skill level

The skill level is the least complicated to recognize and to evaluate. It's pretty objective, is a player left or right handed, does he has a crossover dribble, can he shoot from beyond the arc, can he make a bounce pass, does he has a jump hook, can he make defensive slides etc. All scouts and coaches can see that, however the tricky part is not recognizing the skills, but at which level and in which circumstances is the player still able to perform his skills.

Are some skills more important for basketball than others? I think we all can agree on yes. A player who can't shoot or finish is immediately limited to becoming a role player. A player who can't dribble the ball can't be a creative one on one player. If you can't pass the ball it will be hard to play in a team concept and will cause too many turn overs. But a player, who can't block shots or is a limited rebounder, can still become a very good basketball player. I don't know if anybody ever ranked all the offensive and defensive basketball skills, but it would be nice to have a survey among coaches and scouts how they look at this. It probably differs from country to country and coaching's philosophy, even when there will be a common sense on which skills are the most important.

Mental and physical pressure will absolutely influence the execution of a player's skills. A mini basketball player with very nice crossover dribble blows by his opponent of the same age, but at the next level he maybe can't do the same, because the opponent is a better defender or more physical. Also the stakes are getting bigger and bigger and can make the player think twice before he executes and therefore can't make the same move. Apart from the level of competition you can have 2 players with the same skill set and will evaluate and rate them the same, still one player can play as a high major player and the other only as a low major player. We as scouts and coaches have to anticipate if the young skilled player can do the same at the next level and/or older age and then rate him accordingly. Can he improve?

What is the definition of a good looking skill, how it looks or how efficient it is? For instance the ugly shooting small forward, who makes you cry if you see him taking a 3 point shot, but when you look at his percentages he is 40% from beyond the arc, is that a bad skill? Skill level is more related to, can he execute and is the shot, the dribble, the pass efficient, than does it look nice. Question for a scout/coach is can he be more efficient if he changes it, can we make him improve, can we make him do the same at the next level.

That brings us to two topics about skills that are important to predict if a player can improve.
First physical limitations or extras and medical limitations can influence the final level of execution. Shooting is a good example; if you lack coordination it's a lot more difficult to become a good shooter. The player with limited rotation in his shoulder joint will never be able to shoot the ball as good as the player with a smooth shoulder. Think also of players with very muscular and physical shoulders/upper body who can't get the right form to shoot. Coordination, strength, quickness and flexibility have big impacts on learning and executing skills.
The second one is learning models of motor skills. Some players will pick up skills from one moment to the other while a lot of players have to practice over and over again before they start to manage the skills, if they ever will manage it. I remember a classmate of me at the college for physical education, who after one demonstration of a gymnastic swing on the bar sat down, mentally rehearsed it and then went to the bar and did it, while it took me several days to manage it and I wasn't the worst learner of motor skills. I don't want to go in all the motor skills learning strategies and models, but it's an important subject if you want to predict the progression/future of players. Maybe this is something for another series of articles.

Where we all can agree on is that skills can be taught and most of the time to a good level. Teaching skills can't be done early enough, where physical training and mental training needs to start at the right and older age.
What we try to do is built automatisms and blue prints of simple and complex motor skills. A player can't think about the mechanics of his dribbling, passing, shooting, etc during games, he just have to do it, like driving a car.

For scouts it's interesting to know from where the player comes, which country, club and who his coaches are and were. Differences in basketball culture, history, philosophy and style have a lot of influence on the skill level and skill set of a player. The former Yugoslavian countries put and did put far more time and effort on teaching real basic skills as footwork and the right shooting mechanics than a lot of Western European countries did or do. Europeans in general put more emphasizes on passing than the American basketball school. A country as Lithuania were basketball is almost a religion they practice hours and hours to develop one skill, while in my country they will sue you if you that as a (basketball)coach.

In general the skill level can be taught and that is where good coaching comes in and the willingness to spend

time and effort working with young players.