

Men's Health

Why Soccer Players Are Smarter than You

BY CASSIE SHORTSLEEVE

Frequent heading of a soccer ball isn't good for your brain (**here's why**), but it's not all bad news for participants of the world's most popular sport: Soccer players are significantly smarter than, well, pretty much everyone, according to a new study in *PLoS ONE*.

When professional soccer players were tested on “executive function”—a key aspect in memory, multitasking, and creativity—they scored significantly higher than the general population. In fact, elite players belonged to the best 2 to 5 percent of the total population, says Predrag Petrovic, Ph.D., the lead researcher and professor at Karolinska Institute in Stockholm.

More from MensHealth.com: Learn to Speak Soccer

Why? Soccer players have to adapt constantly to a rapidly changing environment to perform well, says Petrovic. That's easily translated to tests of executive functions like changing strategies and suppressing old, outdated plans, he adds.

“People assume that if you have a gifted arm or can kick a ball that you aren't smart, you don't need to be smart, or both,” says Kristen Dieffenbach, Ph.D., professor at West Virginia University. “High-level sport is physically demanding *and* requires high-level cognitive skills.”

Here's what you can learn from the pros:

Be a Student of Your Game “There's a saying in soccer: You're either physically gifted, or a student of the game,” says Kerry Zavagnin, assistant coach for the Sporting Kansas City

and 11-time member of the U.S. Men's National Team.

“Someone who can read situations and think about solutions instead of always relying on the physical component is a student of the game—that's how I played.”

So maybe you're not the first one to finish reports in the office. Your move: A good player makes all the other players around him better, says Zavagnin. Anticipate what's coming your way by communicating specifics, listening, observing, and learning what people like and don't like. “The players who can take snapshots of the field and make decisions well before they receive the ball are ones with highest chance of success.”

Be Quick on Your Feet “As you increase levels in soccer, the speed of play gets that much faster—not so much the speed of running, but the speed of thought,” says Zavagnin.

Next time you're at the gym with a buddy, try Nick Downing's move. Downing, the trainer for the New England Revolution, swears by a variation of the **depth jump**. “It fires up your fast-twitch muscles,” he says. “I need the guys to be quick off their feet.”

Stand on top of a block and have your friend stand a few feet in front of you. When you step down, land on both feet, and have him point either left or right. Then accelerate in that direction. The visual cue won't come until you put your feet down, so you'll have to rely on quick thinking to make your move, Downing says.

Today's Free PDF Download: The Georges St-Pierre Workout

<http://www.menshealth.com/fitness/why-soccer-players-are-smarter-than-you>