Improving upon Perfection:
Could Zizou have been an even better player?!

By Nick Mitchell

If we examine the rather unmuscled physiques of many of todayôs top football players (I am being kind, scrawny springs to mind when I think of half of the starting line up of any English Premiership team) we would be forgiven for thinking that football is in fact an endurance sport much akin to middle distance running. This is a fallacy exacerbated by the misinterpretation of a host of in game data, most notably the misguided emphasis on total distance covered in a game. Yes, a top class midfielder can total over 8 miles in 90 minutes, but this is so far from being 8 consecutive 11 minute miles that the middle distance analogy fails every time. Far from being solely aerobic in nature, a footballerôs conditioning must include a solid base not just in aerobic conditioning, but also in anaerobic and strength conditioning. It is paramount to success that a good footballer can accelerate quickly, turn on a six pence, ride a tackle and leap for a header. The bottom line here is that if you take a wonderfully gifted player, such as the greatest footballer of the last 15 years Zinedine Zidane (or Zizou to his legion of fans) and make him a more complete athlete, he will also become an even better player.

Here is how I would have worked with the great man to improve upon his already sublime perfection!

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Wrestle!

Former England national coach Sven-Goran Eriksson has come under fire for many things during his somewhat colourful career, however the sarcastic incredulity metered out to his latest training innovation of wrestling is somewhat harsh and unnecessary. Now before you have images of his Manchester City players launching themselves from the top rope Hulk Hogan style, think again. Eriksson brought in a Greco-Roman wrestling coach and his forward thinking is only to be praised. The extra power and balance this will develop in his players will only make them harder to take the ball off and more effective in the tackle.

A very simple way that you can incorporate this into your own training is to ball wrestle with a partner. This is an old rugby trick where you both hold the ball and (whilst staying within the gentlemanly spirit of the Queensbury Rules, so no gouging, biting, or petting!) then quite literally attempt to wrestle / shake the other off it.

Emphasise the Anaerobic Component

One of the biggest misconceptions regarding the physical requirements for football is that it is a purely an aerobic sport. This is an outright fallacy, as although aerobic in duration (90 minutes on field activity will see to that), it is anaerobic in intensity. According to a 2002 study by Jan Hoff at the Norwegian University of Science & Technology a player operates at over 90% of their maximal heart rate whilst engaged in close quarter ball control exercise (such as dribbling) or 5 aside. This tells us that what at first may seem like an aerobic, endurance oriented discipline is in fact anaerobic in nature, and therefore requires a training protocol far different from the traditional ñjog 5 times around the pitchòmethod.

During a match, footballers tend to run in short, hard bursts and then jog or even walk back into position. This is especially true for strikers and defenders, where positioning and reacting are of paramount importance. Training must be structured in such a way to emphasis anaerobic conditioning so that rapid recovery from short sprints is at its optimal level.

This isnâ meant to downplay the importance of aerobic fitness, but it is meant to highlight the essential requirement that differently positioned players, and even teams with differing playing styles, need to factor varying degrees of aerobic and anaerobic conditioning into their training. A midfielder will certainly need to stress the aerobic more than his defensive counterpart.

Furthermore, when designing a football specific training programme great care must be taken to not overplay the aerobic work as it has been proven that an excess of aerobic fitness can actually restrict on the field performance. This is because high levels of aerobic fitness have no impact on the high intensity activities required on the football field. By stressing the endurance component of conditioning, coaches limit the ability of players to develop the strength and power used to kick, sprint, jump and tackle. The type II b muscle fibres used in such activities are only developed by focused strength and power training, endurance work can actually be counterproductive.

It is also worthwhile noting that every footballer is best served by being able to jump as high as possible in order to head the ball. Countless studies have shown us that the more aerobically fit the athlete, the more their vertical jump will decrease! In simple terms the vertical jump is inversely correlated with increases in V02 max. This is because the bodyâs ability to generate power is limited by excessive aerobic conditioning.

Strength Training for Speed

It never ceases to amaze me that some football coaches still labour under the massive misapprehension that lifting heavy weights will make their players slower. Sure, tell that to any world class sprinter and watch their well developed, *weight trained* muscles convulse with laughter. With increased explosive strength comes the ability to better overcome inertia. That makes you sprint quicker, and the ability to be a quick sprinter can often be the difference between making the starting 11 and never even getting to the reserves bench.

Limit Endurance Training

I can make a blanket statement here ï all football players would improve their performance if they cut down on their endurance work. I have seen so many dedicated players who train like middle distance runners and end up short changing themselves despite working hard. As we have already established extended periods of endurance training are superfluous to effective football performance and restrict opportunities to improve the more important explosive conditioning and speed that are vital for success. Significant repetitive training loads of long distance running will also always increase the chance of developing injuries to the knees, hips and ankles.

Lift Real Weights!

Whenever I am asked to look through a football teamõs weight training programme I always see a preponderance of misplaced exercises. The overemphasis of one movement in particular is incredibly common. Due to the logical notion that form follows function it is assumed that the leg extension is the primary movement for increasing kicking power. This does make intuitive sense as the movement of flexing the quadriceps muscles seems to perfectly imitate a kick of the leg. However maximal shooting and passing power is generated by the muscles that extend and flex the hips (hamstrings and gluteals), not the quadriceps. There is a simple test to prove this ï sit on the floor with both legs flexed at a 90 degree angle. If you kick a football from this angle you will feel the muscles in your posterior chain (hamstrings, hips and buttocks) in action. These are the muscles most recruited during football (and during sprinting too ï think of the fantastic hamstring and glute development of top sprinters) and are best trained using variations of the squat movement.

Squats, like the action used to kick a football, require the use of many muscles to both stabilize and produce multiple-joint actions simultaneously. Leg extensions merely require that the use of one muscle group, the quadriceps, to perform one joint action - extension of the knee. In addition to having movement patterns that are closely related to the kicking action, squatting exercises are actually much safer than leg extensions which produce excessive shearing force across the patella (knee cap). Full squats conversely, have been shown time and again to improve knee stability (a crucial factor in the prevention of common footballing injuries) as well as develop an explosive power that can never be generated by the limited movement of a leg extension exercise.

Add some beef to the upper body

Far too many players appreciate the need for powerful Stewart Pearce type legs, yet completely neglect the need for upper body strength. A more powerful upper body will improve sprinting speed (acceleration begins with the upper body ï to achieve maximal speed the torque of the right leg must be countered by the torque of the left upper torso and vice versa) and allow a player to better shrug off tackles. One of the many reasons why England holds its breath every time that Wayne Rooney is injured is because his boxer like upper body musculature makes it very difficult for opponents to knock him off the ball.

Putting it all Together

Clearly there are multiple compelling reasons for a rethink of traditional football conditioning strategies. Everything we have discussed in this article will make the footballer quicker, stronger, and more resistant to injury. Of course it wonõ give you the skills of a Zidane, thatõs part hard work and part God given, but if you are physically a man amongst boys, you will have a tremendous advantage every time you step on the football field.