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W H I T E P A P E R

The Qualities that Distinguish Top Basketball Players



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What does it take to play in the NBA? The answer is obvious, right? You need exceptional talent, physical attributes, and determination.

But lots of people play basketball, and many players are coordinated, tall, and fast. Every year, a few hundred of the most gifted eligible players, usually from the U.S. college ranks, come up in serious discussion as potential NBA draftees. Assuming relative equality in the aforementioned skill factors, what is it about the 60 men who are chosen annually in the NBA draft that sets them apart from the rest?

According to research conducted by Caliper, a talent management consulting firm based in Princeton, New Jersey, the difference is not solely determined by one's physical gifts, but, rather, by the player's personality traits. But what kind of personality traits, specifically?

"Teams are looking for a player's potential to raise his game to a higher level," said Ricardo Roman, Caliper's Vice President of Strategic Alliances and Caliper Sports, who has been consulting with professional and college sports teams since 2002. "We're talking about the intangibles, like a willingness to learn and the ability to channel intensity."

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While a few natural-born superstars emerge every year (and are typically selected first, second, and third overall in the draft), players who display level-headed, self-disciplined natures — and who are resilient to criticism and willing to follow rules — tend to be viewed by scouts and General Managers as safer picks than equally skilled players who do not exhibit those traits.

Many drafted players also show lower measures of sociability and persuasive drive, as well as a strong degree of stress tolerance. In practical terms, players who remain task focused, coachable, and disciplined about practicing are more desirable than those who seek attention and worry both about possible negative consequences and how they are perceived by fellow players.

Dr. Tom Schoenfelder, Caliper's Senior Vice President of Research and Development, said, "Self-discipline and resilience are qualities we find in successful athletes across other sports, as our research on baseball players reveals, so it makes sense that we see the same thing in basketball players."

Using the **Caliper Profile** to reveal one's strengths, limitations, and developmental areas also allows you to "look beneath the surface to see what motivates an athlete, so you can turn up the volume on the desirable qualities and accelerate that player's development," Roman added.

The Class of 2014

Caliper has been gathering data on current and potential NBA players for several years, and the findings about 2014's draft class remain consistent with past results: NBA teams value players who can stay focused and handle challenges in a level-headed way, while also listening to the coach and being receptive to guidance.

The 2014 NBA draft, which took place in June, saw a total of 60 players chosen over the course of two rounds. Caliper has since reviewed and collated the data to see what findings were uncovered.

Methodology and Results

In an effort to pinpoint significant and determining personality traits in top-performing basketball players—relative to the general population—Caliper assessed 98 potential draftees (i.e., highly ranked collegiate players who were eligible for the 2014 NBA draft) using the Caliper Profile, a scientifically validated personality-assessment tool that measures intrinsic traits, motivations, and analytical ability. Of those 98 players, 28 were selected by NBA teams in the 60-player draft.

Following the draft, Caliper compared the personality traits of the 28 NBA-bound players to the overall group of 98 players assessed, finding that the drafted players exhibited higher levels of task focus, receptiveness to coaching, self-discipline, and stress tolerance than those who were not drafted.

Nine of the 28 players selected were chosen in the first round and 19 were taken in the second round, which may suggest that the natural talent and skills of standout athletes plays a bigger role than intrinsic motivation in the initial selections. However, when physical attributes become harder to differentiate between later in the first round and into the second, personality dynamics can inform teams' drafting strategies and break the deadlock when choosing amongst players.

Second-round picks are, thus, more likely to have earned the opportunity to play professional basketball through intangible qualities such as tenacity and resilience, on average measuring higher in attributes like level-headedness, stress tolerance, and self-structure than their first-round counterparts, and lower in aggressiveness. In essence, they may not have the same innate athletic gifts as the top picks in the NBA draft, but they do show unique personality traits that separate them from similarly talented players who go undrafted.

“These findings are not surprising, necessarily, but they are interesting,” said Dr. Schoenfelder, who oversaw the data collection. “The strong relationship between resilience and stress tolerance is consistent with research and literature generated from other validated assessment tools as well as from the field of sports psychology.”

What About Long-Term Performance?

While the qualities discussed above might be desirable to NBA teams looking to draft future starters, one could ask if these personality attributes correlate with performance success on a season-by-season basis.

To answer this question, Caliper re-evaluated (and continues to investigate) basketball player personality data going back approximately 10 years, during which time the consulting firm assessed 245 athletes who went on to start in the NBA. (Caliper’s privacy policy prevents the release of specific player names.) When measuring numerical personality scores against typical indicators of performance success in basketball, such as field-goal accuracy, free-throw percentage, assists, points scored, and turnover rate, some interesting patterns emerge:

Career free-throw percentage

The players assessed by Caliper with the best free-throw percentages tend to measure highly in:

- Resilience
- Conscientiousness
- Analytical ability

This finding suggests the level-headedness to handle pressure and the discipline needed to engage in repetitive shooting practice.

Career turnover ratio

The players assessed by Caliper with the lowest turnover ratios tend to measure highly in:

- Resilience and level-headedness
- Conscientiousness and self-discipline
- Analytical ability

This data shows a strong correlation between level-headedness, attention to detail, and well-thought-out actions on the basketball court. That is, resilient players who have the discipline to practice are less likely to panic and force plays when an opposing player is bearing down on them.

Career 3-point percentage

The players assessed by Caliper with strong 3-point percentages tend to measure highly in:

- Self-discipline
- Attention to detail
- Analytical ability

“Our ‘aha moment’ came when we discovered that many top players were high in task focus,” said Dr. Schoenfelder. “That means that, as college kids, they were less apt to seek distraction and more inclined to stay late practicing and honing their craft.”

Data collection and review related to NBA player performance and personality dynamics are ongoing, and new patterns and trends may emerge. However, recurring findings point to discipline, resilience, and level-headedness as strong indicators of top performance in basketball players, which are intriguing and hard-to-ignore results for researchers, team managers, and scouts, alike.

It should be noted, too, that the science of evaluating basketball players’ intrinsic motivations is still in its nascent stages.

“The sports industry could be better served when it comes to understanding and using personality data,” said Roman. “There’s a rich pool of information still being explored, and it’s not some flavor-of-the-month trend. It’s human motivation and personality. Tapping into that, customizing it, breaking performance motivators down by position... There is so much possibility.”