

Two-footed professional footballers are able to appropriate the rents from their scarce talent



Masterly Tom Finney remains a trial to the best defences, even though he has been worried by injuries during the last two or three seasons. He deceives opponents by his habit of taking the ball with his left foot, as he is doing in the picture.

Image: Footballers of the 50s

in brief...

The wage premium of two-footed footballers

The study of football – the clubs, the players, the managers, the referees – is telling us more and more about the operation of labour markets and incentives. Here, **Alex Bryson** and colleagues show that two-footedness – the rare ability to use both feet equally well to pass, tackle and shoot – commands a large wage premium.

There is widespread public concern that some workers – chiefly senior executives in ‘bailed out’ banks – are reaping huge financial rewards for what appears to be very poor performance. The retort is that these highly paid executives are simply being paid their market worth and that attempts to pay them less could lead to lack of motivation and increased likelihood that the best will leave for better opportunities elsewhere.

The debate is familiar to those with knowledge of sports economics. Some professional sports in the United States, notably American football and ice hockey, have team payrolls that are heavily regulated in a salary cap arrangement. As yet it is not wholly clear what the impact of these rules and regulations is on incentives, individual performance and team performance.

In Europe, where there is a long tradition of not interfering in professional athletes’ wages, earnings can be very substantial. Professional footballers in particular earn considerable amounts of money in the form of endorsements and sponsorship, but also from their wages. If you ask supporters whether the players in their team deserve what they earn, some will say nobody deserves to earn £x more than the person in the street (the argument levelled at bankers, traders and the like), but most will say: ‘it all depends on how they perform on the field’.

There’s the rub. How do we really know whether players receive a wage that is equivalent to their marginal productivity? We may know what they have been doing on the pitch – how many passes they made, how many goals they scored, how many appearances they made – and this clearly helps. But we have more than that: a variable that really identifies a rare talent that teams are very likely to pay for. That is two-footedness.

Two-footedness is the ability to use both feet equally well to pass, tackle and shoot. Unsurprisingly, this versatility is strongly related to player performance. Furthermore, it is a fairly unusual talent – only around one sixth of players in the top five European leagues are two-footed.

It seems that two-footedness can be taught. Indeed, Tom Finney, a famous English forward of the 1950s who taught himself to use both feet, is cited as the inspiration for an institution set up in the UK in 2004, which claims

to be ‘the first and original soccer school that concentrates solely on improving the other foot’.

But this training of two-footedness is something that can only be properly developed at an early age in the formative years of a player’s career, and it is difficult to instil in today’s established professional players. Hence, we can treat footedness as a pre-determined specialist ability that is capable of generating a return.

Does this talent translate into wages? The answer is ‘yes’. There is a raw premium of over 60% relative to right-footed players, which falls to around 40% controlling for demographic characteristics, position in the team and the team’s ability to pay players. It falls by half to around 20% when controlling for other performance measures, but remains at around 20% with all these controls. And it remains large even within teams.

This is strong evidence of a clear link between performance and wages among professional football players. But is there anything in it for teams? Are they able to appropriate any of the returns to employing two-footed players? In an efficient labour market, where players are free to move (as they have been since the Bosman ruling in the European Court of Justice in 1995), players should be able to hold onto their hard-earned cash.

Our empirical evidence seems to confirm this. Having controlled for other relevant factors, such as total payroll, the proportion of two-footed players in a team does not significantly affect the number of points the team gets at the end of the season. It seems that two-footed players are able to appropriate the rents from their scarce talent.

This article summarises ‘The Returns to Scarce Talent: Footedness and Player Remuneration in European Soccer’ by Alex Bryson, Bernd Frick and Rob Simmons, CEP Discussion Paper No. 948 (<http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp0948.pdf>).

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