



Exploring the Relationship between Temperament and Preferred Playing Positions Among Soccer Athletes

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ABSTRACTS

Purpose	This study investigates the connection between an athlete's temperament and their preferred soccer playing positions, concentrating on personality traits like introversion, extroversion, neuroticism, and traditional temperament types (melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, sanguine).
Materials and Methods	Conducted among soccer players at Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria, the research employs a cross-sectional quantitative design. A total of 98 male athletes, selected through purposive sampling, participated in the Vice-Chancellor's soccer competition in 2022. Their preferred positions were classified into central and side roles.
Result	Results from hypothesis testing indicated a statistically significant relationship between introversion/extroversion and playing position ($\chi^2 = 5.26$, $p = 0.02$). Notably, 86.4% of introverts opted for central positions, compared to 66.7% of extroverts. In contrast, neuroticism did not significantly impact position preference ($\chi^2 = 0.18$, $p = 0.67$). Additionally, a strong relationship was found between personality temperament and playing position ($\chi^2 = 19.56$, $p = 0.003$). Phlegmatic and choleric individuals were more inclined to occupy midfield roles, while melancholic and phlegmatic players were primarily in defense, and attackers tended to have melancholic and sanguine traits.
Conclusion	These findings suggest that personality traits have a notable influence on playing position preferences in soccer, offering useful insights for coaches and sports psychologists regarding player selection and team dynamics. Future research might explore other psychological and physiological factors affecting position choices in competitive soccer.
Keywords	Temperament; Choleric; Athlete selection; Psychological profile; Sports psychology.

INTRODUCTION

Soccer teams rely on individual skills and collective synergy for success (Araújo & Davids, 2016). To achieve this, players must be completely engaged in their roles and committed to their duties. This approach enables them to complement their teammates' abilities, fill gaps in the team's strategy, and create a cohesive and effective unit. This requires a deep knowledge of their abilities and a willingness to adapt their playing style to the team's needs. A team characterized by a high level of person-job fit (PJF), where players are well-suited to their respective roles, is likely to demonstrate

effective adaptation and maximize performance. This alignment ultimately influences the team's overall success (Sengupta et al., 2015).

PJF, a concept grounded in industrial-organizational psychology, assesses how individuals perceive their compatibility with job requirements and links job characteristics to employee attributes (Chen et al., 2014). According to Stich (2021), PJF refers to the alignment between the attributes of a job and the traits that individuals seek in their roles. In this context, PJF is evaluated from the standpoint of individuals pursuing specific job traits or characteristics, highlighting its significance in fostering optimal team performance. The individual will sense a good fit with the work if it has the necessary features. Furthermore, Sylva et al. (2019) claimed that PJF has two dimensions: needs-supplies fit (NSF) and demands-abilities fit (DAF). The NSF is concerned with the appropriateness of individual needs, wants, and preferences for items that may be met via employment. DAF, on the other hand, is concerned with the appropriateness of an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities concerning work needs. Based on several definitions that have been summarized, Langgeng et al. (2021) stated that PJF is a match between the knowledge, skills, and abilities of individuals who will fill a job with qualifications that are considered suitable for the needs of the job. This suggests that a player's success in a particular position is heavily influenced by their inherent qualities and how well they align with the demands of that role.

Determining the best position for a player in football is a critical aspect of team success. Players are often assigned to specific positions based on their team's tactical approach, but this doesn't necessarily mean they are suited to play in those positions. Wing players, positioned on the field's outer edges, provide width and create space for central players. Their speed and agility allow them to beat defenders and deliver crosses. As full-backs, wingers, or wingbacks, they play a crucial role in creating scoring opportunities for their team. In contrast, Center players, positioned in the midfield, control the game's tempo, create chances, and link defense and attack. They need strong passing, vision, control, physicality, and tactical awareness. Central midfielders focus on passing, reading plays, and positioning, while center forwards excel at finishing, positioning, and holding off defenders.

Moreover, each position, ranging from goalkeepers to forwards, is defined by specific roles and responsibilities that collectively contribute to both defensive stability and offensive potency. Each position in soccer has specific roles: goalkeepers prevent goals, defenders protect the backline, midfielders control possession and create chances, and forwards score and assist. (Gobbo, 2023). However, contemporary soccer's tactical evolution has blurred traditional positional boundaries, with players often assuming hybrid roles and demonstrating positional fluidity, thereby complicating the once-clear distinctions.

Actual playing position refers to the position or role a player is deployed in during a match, which can be influenced by team strategy, formations, and tactical adjustments made by coaches. For example, a player may be assigned to play as a central midfielder in one game but may find themselves positioned as a winger in another due to tactical needs. The preferred playing position is where a player feels most comfortable and effective based on their skill set, physical attributes, and personal inclinations. This preference often aligns with their natural abilities; for instance, a player who excels in dribbling and pace might prefer to play as a winger rather than as a center-back. Traditionally, football coaches rely on their intuition and experience to evaluate players and assign them to positions. Players may grudge while complying with the coach's instructions.

However, alignment between players' preferred position and that of the coach might make players feel unfulfilled during the game, which further affects players' performance on the pitch. As a result, success in elite sport relies on aligning a performer's inherent tendencies with their

competitive role. Chelsea football club's recruitment challenges illustrate this principle at the team level. The club spent millions trying to replace Didier Drogba with strikers such as Fernando Torres and Demba Ba, but none met expectations until José Mourinho's return brought Diego Costa, who briefly restored the club's attacking edge, yet the same issue reappeared after his departure (Diamond, 2022). Even data-driven recruitment efforts were not enough, as players who performed well statistically elsewhere often struggled to replicate their output at Chelsea (Crisandy, 2020). This pattern reflects a broader Premier League trend. Since 2021, clubs have collectively lost over £1 billion on net transfers (FourFourTwo, 2024), demonstrating that even talented players can underperform when there is a mismatch between their attributes and the club's tactical or cultural needs. To address this, elite European clubs increasingly consider psychological factors, including body language and behavior, to evaluate player fit (Nassoori, 2025).

One useful approach for understanding these psychological tendencies comes from the temperamental framework of Hippocrates, which offers a lens for identifying strengths suited to specific playing positions. The four classical temperaments—choleric, melancholic, sanguine, and phlegmatic—provide insights into soccer athletes' behaviors. Choleric players are assertive and competitive, often taking leadership roles but risking confrontational behavior. Melancholic athletes are reflective and detail-oriented, which aids performance analysis but may lead to overthinking. Sanguine players are sociable and enthusiastic, promoting team cohesion through their positivity. In contrast, phlegmatic players are calm and composed, facilitating collaboration and strategic play, though their placidity may limit assertiveness.

The temperament of athletes has been shown to influence their performance in sports events. According to Barros et al. (2007), the total distance covered by forwards (FB), central midfielders (CM), and wing midfielders (WM) was significantly greater than that of center defenders (CD) and fullbacks (FW). This disparity in distance can be interpreted through the lens of temperament. Rhodes and Smith (2006) showed that physical activity involvement has a medium positive association with extraversion. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that extroverts are more likely to occupy positions demanding high levels of physical exertion, such as central midfielders and wingers. Conversely, introverted athletes may excel in strategic roles that require tactical acumen, such as in CD positions, where they are less involved in extensive running but contribute through thoughtful placement and decision-making. Players, often exhibiting more introverted and deliberate characteristics, might be predisposed to roles that require less overall distance covered, such as center-backs and forwards.

Research suggests mixed evidence on neuroticism and soccer playing positions. Gladstone, O'Connor, and Taylor (2019) argue that highly neurotic individuals often occupy peripheral roles in social groups and may avoid highly visible or stressful positions, which in soccer could lead them to prefer defensive roles rather than striker. However, Taher et al. (2025) found anxiety levels were moderate across all positions, indicating psychological pressure exists throughout the team. Similarly, Hiller (2025) showed that players preferring offensive roles had higher Need for Structure levels than defensive players, suggesting attackers may be attracted to the organized patterns of offensive play. These findings indicate that positional preference cannot be explained by neuroticism alone.

Kaveshnikova et al. (2023) said that in track and field athletes, temperament features vary by specialization: predominantly sanguine and choleric-melancholic types in speed and power events, mixed sanguine-choleric types in 400m runners, and 75% sanguine-phlegmatic types in endurance races (Kaveshnikova et al., 2023).

Although prior research has shown that temperament influences athletic performance, such as the greater distances covered by certain soccer positions (Barros et al., 2007) and the positive link between physical activity and extraversion (Rhodes and Smith, 2006), as well as temperament differences across track and field specializations (Kaveshnikova et al., 2023), the specific connection between temperament and preferred soccer positions is still not clearly understood. In Nigeria, research indicates that school athletes experience moderate levels of anxiety, and aspects such as freedom from worry are significantly associated with sports anxiety (Iwuagwu et al., 2021). Additionally, certain personality traits, including conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness, have been shown to positively influence sports performance (Adeyemi, 2025). Despite these findings, there is a limited understanding of how individual temperament influences the preferred playing positions of soccer athletes in Nigeria.

Furthermore, this study uniquely distinguishes between preferred and actual playing positions, an area often overlooked in sports psychology research. By examining the alignment between a player's temperament and the role they believe suits them best, the study offers new insights into player satisfaction, performance potential, and positional suitability in modern soccer. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to identify the temperament types commonly found in soccer players, determine their preferred playing positions, and examine how particular temperament traits may align with roles that involve varying physical and cognitive demands.

Investigating preferred playing styles clarifies a player's innate capabilities and potential for growth. Players perform best in their designated roles, enhancing overall effectiveness. Analyzing these styles yields insights into decision-making, movement patterns, and tactical strategies. Identifying a player's preferred position is crucial for long-term development, allowing a focus on strengths and weaknesses to improve skills and versatility. Understanding how different temperament types correlate with specialization may provide insights into optimizing training and performance strategies for soccer athletes. Specifically, this study aims to explore whether athletes with temperaments gravitate towards specific playing positions within the spectrum of track and field events

Objectives of the Study

To determine whether the personality traits of introversion and extroversion are associated with soccer players preferred playing positions, specifically central versus wide roles.

To examine the relationship between levels of neuroticism and non-neuroticism and the preferred playing positions of soccer players.

To investigate whether the temperament types melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, and sanguine are significantly related to soccer players' positional preferences.

Hypotheses

This study examines the relationship between personality traits and the preferred playing positions of soccer players. It is proposed that there is a significant relationship between the personality traits of introversion and extroversion and the preferred playing position of soccer players, particularly whether they prefer playing in the center or on the side of the field. The study also proposes that there is a significant relationship between neuroticism and non-neuroticism and the preferred playing positions of soccer players. In addition, it is proposed that the temperaments of melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, and sanguine are significantly related to the preferred playing positions of soccer players. Role assignment, reducing stress caused by unsuitable positions, and supporting overall player development.

METHODS

Research Design

In this study, the researcher examined the influence of personality traits on preferred playing positions among soccer athletes at Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria. Therefore, the study is quantitative with a cross-sectional design. The study's independent variables are extroversion and neuroticism subscales of the Big Five personality trait, while preferred position is the study's dependent variable.

Study Participants

The target population of the research consists of soccer athletes of Nasarawa State University, Keffi, located in Nigeria. Ninety-eight (98) athletes were drawn from the students in the tertiary institution haphazardly. Since only soccer athletes were of interest in this study, a purposive sampling technique was used to select soccer athletes who took part in the vice-chancellors' soccer competition in 2022. Visitors, staff, and non-athletes were excluded from the study. In terms of demographic characteristics, all participants were male; most of the participants' ages ranged between 18 and 25 years (N=57, 58.16%). 11 athletes (11.22%) were less than 18 years old. 26 athletes (26.5%) were between 26 and 33 years of age, while 4 athletes (0.04%) were over 34 years old.

Instrument

The extraversion and neurotic subscales of the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John et al. 1991) were used to assess personality traits. The BFI is a 44-item scale evaluating openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale, with scoring based on the provided manual guidelines. The Big Five Inventory (BFI) has test-retest reliability of 0.85, Cronbach's alpha of 0.80, and construct validity of 0.75 (John et al., 1991). while the original psychometric properties for Nigerian samples were provided by Umeh (2004). Only sixteen items made up of eight items from the extroversion subscale and eight items from the neuroticism subscale.

To assess preferred playing positions, participants were asked to indicate their primary position of choice from a predetermined list. This list included: Goalkeeper, Center-Back, Side-Back, Wing-Back, Defensive Midfield, Center Midfield, Attacking Midfield, Winger/Side Midfielder, Supporting Striker, and Striker. This single-item measure provided a straightforward method for identifying participants preferred playing positions on the soccer field.

Statistical Analysis

To analyze the data, SPSS version 20 was used. The results were summarized with frequencies and percentages for categorical variables and means with standard deviations for quantitative variables. Using inferential statistics, hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were analyzed using chi-square. For hypothesis three, Athletes who played as goalkeepers, center back, full back, and wing back were regarded as defenders and coded 1. Defensive midfielders, central midfielders, and attacking midfielders were regarded as midfielders and coded 2. While wingers, supporting strikers, and strikers were regarded as attackers and coded 3. Similarly, for hypotheses 1 and 2, wingbacks, full backs, and side midfielders were coded 1, while goalkeepers, center back, defensive midfielders, central midfielders, attacking midfielders, supporting strikers, and strikers were coded 2.

RESULT

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant relationship between the personality traits of introversion and extroversion and the preferred playing position (center vs. side) among soccer players.

Table 1. Preferred Playing Position (center vs. side) between introverted and extroverted players.

		Center (%)	Side (%)	Total (%)	X ²	P- Value
Extrovert	Count	24(66.7)	12(33.3)	36(100)	5.26	.02
	Expected Count	28.4	7.6	36.0		
Introvert	Count	51(86.4)	8(13.6)	59(100)		
	Expected Count	46.6	12.4	59.0		
Total	Count	75(78.9)	20(21.1)	95(100)		

The analysis showed a statistically significant relationship between personality traits and preferred position, as indicated by the chi-square value and the probability value reported. Because the probability value was below the standard significance threshold of .05, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was accepted. The pattern of results shows that introverted players were more likely to prefer central positions compared to their extroverted counterparts, who showed a comparatively stronger preference for side positions. This finding suggests that central roles may appeal more to players who display quieter, more deliberate traits, whereas extroverted players may be drawn to wider positions that require frequent engagement with open space.

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant relationship between neuroticism and non-neuroticism and the preferred playing positions among soccer players.

Table 2. Preferred playing positions between neurotic and non-neurotic soccer players.

		Center (%)	Side (%)	Total (%)	X ²	P- Value
Neurotic	Count	34(81)	8(19)	42(100)	0,18	.67
	Expected Count	33.2	8.8	42.0		
Non-Neurotic	Count	51(86.4)	8(13.6)	59(100)		
	Expected Count	46.6	12.4	59.0		
Total	Count	75(78.9)	20(21.1)	95(100)		

The p-value of .67 suggests no significant difference in preferred playing positions between neurotic and non-neurotic individuals, indicating that neuroticism does not play a substantial role in determining preferred playing position. Such as playing positions, may not be as pronounced as hypothesized. The distribution of preferences indicated that both neurotic and non-neurotic players tended to favor central positions at similar rates. This suggests that emotional stability or instability does not meaningfully influence whether players choose central or wide positions. Psychological tendencies associated with neuroticism, such as sensitivity or anxiety, did not appear to push players toward or away from specific areas of the pitch.

Hypothesis 3: There is a significant difference between personality traits (melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, and sanguine) and preferred playing positions (defender, midfielder, and attacker)

Table 3. Relationship between the temperament of melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, and sanguine and the preferred playing positions.

Crosstab		new playing			Total	X ²	P-Value
		attacker	defender	midfield			
Choleric	Count (%)	0(0)	2(14.3)	12(85.7)	14(100)		
	Expected Count	2.8	4.1	7.1	14.0		
Melancholic	Count	8(28.6)	12(42.9)	8(28.6)	28(100)		
	Expected Count	5.6	8.3	14.1	28.0		
Phlegmatic	Count	3(9.7)	8(25.8)	20(64.5)	31		
	Expected Count	6.2	9.1	15.7	31.0		
Sanguine	Count	8(36.4)	6(27.3)	8(36.4)	22(100)		
	Expected Count	4.4	6.5	11.1	22.0		
Total	Count	19	28	48	95		
						19.56	.003

The analysis indicates a significant relationship between personality traits and playing positions in soccer. The findings suggest that phlegmatic and choleric individuals are more likely to occupy midfield positions, while defenders are predominantly melancholic and phlegmatic. In contrast, attacking positions are more commonly associated with melancholic and sanguine individuals.

DISCUSSION

Introversion and Extroversion on Preferred Playing Position

The first hypothesis showed that there was a significant difference in the preferred playing position between introverted and extroverted soccer players, with introverts more often choosing central roles and extroverts gravitating toward flank positions. The preference of introverts for central areas can be understood because these positions require sustained focus and careful decision-making, aligning with the reflective and detail-oriented tendencies of introverts, who typically take time to process information before acting (Kuofie et al., 2015). Roles such as center-back or holding midfielder demand caution, strategy, and tactical awareness, attributes that are often less appealing to individuals who display higher levels of extraversion (Levitch et al., 2020). In contrast, more extraverted players tend to react quickly in sudden situations, and their heightened responsiveness supports the rapid movement and frequent directional changes required in wide positions (Doucet and Stelmack, 2000). Because flank roles involve continuous sprints, dynamic transitions, and high physical output, extroverted players may find these demands energizing, making the wing positions more suitable for their active and impulsive nature compared with the more measured responsibilities found in central defensive or midfield roles.

Neuroticism and Non-Neuroticism on Preferred Playing Position

This second hypothesis suggests that neuroticism, a personality trait characterized by anxiety, moodiness, worry, and emotional instability, does not appear to be a significant factor in determining preferred playing positions in soccer. This contrasts with Gladstone, O'Connor, and Taylor (2019), who argued that highly neurotic individuals tend to avoid high-visibility or stressful roles, which in soccer might translate to defensive or peripheral positions. However, the results are more consistent with Taher et al. (2025), who reported that anxiety levels were moderate across all positions, suggesting that all players experience some degree of psychological pressure regardless of position. Similarly, Hiller (2025) found that offensive players exhibited higher Need for Structure

levels than defensive players, showing that factors other than neuroticism, such as tactical demands and role-specific organization, may better explain positional preference.

Temperament Types on Preferred Playing Position

The third hypothesis found that there was a meaningful connection between the temperaments melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric, and sanguine and the preferred playing positions of defender, midfielder, and attacker. Choleric individuals often exhibit natural leadership qualities, including the ability to motivate and inspire others (Mahusay-Baria, 2015), which aligns well with the leadership responsibilities commonly required in midfield roles. Phlegmatic individuals tend to be stable, consistent, and calm (Mahusay-Baria, 2015), traits essential for midfielders who must maintain concentration and composure throughout a match. Their emphasis on cooperation and avoiding conflict makes them valuable for sustaining team unity and creating a positive atmosphere (Ekstrand, 2016), and their calmness under pressure enhances their suitability for defensive roles where steady decision-making is crucial (Cherry, 2023). Melancholic individuals possess a strong analytical mind (Cherry, 2023), enabling them to read the game, anticipate opponents' actions, and make calculated decisions, abilities that support both defensive reliability and creative attacking play. Their detail-oriented and reflective tendencies help them spot weaknesses in defensive structures, craft unexpected strategies, and generate imaginative attacks, supported by their deep engagement with the game and capacity for creative visualization (Brady and Haapala, 2003). Sanguine individuals, with their high energy levels ((Cherry, 2023)), confidence, and risk-taking tendencies (Rakhmanina et al., 2020), are well-suited for attacking positions that demand speed, adaptability, and boldness. Their spontaneity and playful nature (Cherry, 2023) contribute to creative dribbles, unconventional moves, and decisive shots, while their optimism helps them recover quickly from mistakes, sustaining their contribution in high-pressure offensive situations.

Despite the significant findings, this study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the sample size was relatively small (N = 95), which may limit the generalizability of the results to the broader population of soccer players. Second, the study relied on self-reported measures of personality and temperament, which may be subject to response bias or inaccuracies in self-assessment. Third, the study examined only the relationship between personality traits, temperament, and preferred positions without considering other potential influences, such as skill level, tactical requirements, coaching styles, or team dynamics. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study prevents causal inferences, meaning it cannot be determined whether personality and temperament directly influence position preference or if other factors mediate this relationship.

Future studies should consider using larger and more diverse samples to improve the generalizability of findings. Longitudinal research designs could provide deeper insights into how personality and temperament influence position preferences over time, particularly as players develop and transition between teams or levels of competition. Incorporating observational assessments or coach ratings alongside self-reported measures could reduce potential bias and provide a more comprehensive understanding of player behavior. Moreover, future research could explore additional factors such as age groups, genders, technical skills, physical attributes, tactical adaptability, and team culture to examine how these interact with personality and temperament in determining optimal playing positions. Experimental studies could also investigate whether targeted psychological training can enhance performance in non-preferred positions, contributing to greater tactical flexibility. Finally, expanding the study to include professional and youth soccer leagues across different countries could reveal cultural or league-specific patterns that may influence the relationship between temperament and positional preferences.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between personality traits and preferred playing positions in soccer. The findings suggest a significant association between these two variables, indicating that individuals with specific personality traits tend to gravitate towards positions in the field. Specifically, introverts show a strong preference for the center position. Phlegmatic and choleric individuals often play midfield, while melancholic and phlegmatic players typically defend; melancholic and sanguine players attack.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors found no conflict of interest in this case.

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