

***Not every athlete has had their name entered into the dictionary. Zlatan Ibrahimovic has. As of 2012, to 'zlatan' means 'to dominate', which he has consistently done on the football field for clubs like Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain. Known for his exciting and unpredictable technical skills, he is an athlete who plays with passion.***

***Throughout his career he has received medical care from all over Europe, but there is one consistent experience that he takes wherever he plays: his relationship with his doctor is one of closeness and confidence – like a best friend. Here, the Swedish striker tells Dr Nebojsa Popovic about his relationship with his doctor and his growing awareness for his own physical health.***



***What is football to you?***

Football is everything. It is made up of many small parts to make it whole. It is being healthy, being happy and something I love. For me, it is passion.

***How tough is it to be a top athlete?***

I think it is very tough. You have to work very very hard. You train every day to get better but in doing that, you take risks every day too. Injuries happen – you hope that they don't but sometimes they do. Essentially, you sacrifice your body.

People think that it's easy, but they don't understand that football is our whole lives and it is hard. We have to stay at our best constantly, when in reality it's easier to fluctuate, to go up and down. It's difficult to stay on top – you have to perform well every single day to demonstrate every day that you are working hard and are at your best.

- 2012** 'Zlatan' added to the Swedish dictionary, meaning 'to dominate'
- 2012** Scored what is called the 'Best Goal Ever' – an overhead kick from 30 yards out (v. England)
- 2012** Joined Paris Saint-Germain in July
- 2012** Named captain of Swedish National team
- 2012** Awarded the 'Serie A Golden Boot' for most goals scored in the 2011-12 season (28)
- 2010** Transferred to AC Milan
- 2009** Selected for the UEFA Team of the Year
- 2009** Transferred to Barcelona for €66 million, the 2nd highest transfer fee ever
- 2009** Awarded the 'Serie A Golden Boot' for most goals scored in the 2008-09 season (25)
- 2008** Scored 'Goal of the Season' against Bologna
- 2006** Moved to Inter Milan for €24.8 million
- 2004** Moved to Juventus
- 2001** Moved to Amsterdam-based team, Ajax
- 1999** Debut for the Swedish club Malmö

**How much is talent and how much is work when it comes to making a professional athlete?**

I think talent is about 30% and then the rest is hard work. Talent doesn't mean you will win. Talent is something you are born with. You see the opportunity of somebody with talent, but if you don't work hard, this talent is a waste of time.

**What is your personal relationship with the team doctor? What kind of doctor do you like to work with?**

For me, the doctor is my best friend. He is the one I give the most confidence to because he doesn't see me as a football player. It's different to a relationship with the coach; when the coach sees me, he only thinks about football and how he can use me to play. But when the doctor looks at me, he sees a person rather than a player. He thinks about my health and how I feel and that I have to be 100% healthy, not 99%.



If you are injured, the coach will still push you on the field, but the doctor will not. I remember when I was in Inter I got a kick to the head and a scan showed I had a lesion in my head. The coach felt I could still play but the doctor said no, I couldn't, I had to rest. So you have two different ways of thinking: the doctor thinks about your health and the coach thinks about how you can be used to win games. It is important for me to have a doctor with a strong personality because I have to be healthy – that is the most important thing.

Every time that we players have a problem, we go to the doctor. It is important that he knows his profession and he has confidence in his knowledge but he must have a good relationship with every player because whenever there is a problem, we don't go to anybody else. The first person we look for is the doctor, because he is the one who has to make you feel good and who can make you better and he becomes like a best friend to you.

**You have played for many teams all over the world and at each new club you had a new medical staff. Tell us about the differences between them.**

To start with, in Sweden we actually didn't have a doctor with the team all the time. Instead we had a doctor at the hospital, so if we had a problem we went there. I really didn't notice how important the doctor is for the team while I was playing in Sweden, but when I moved to Ajax it was different. There we had a full-time doctor with us.

But I was young then. When you are young you can afford injuries without the consequences of an older player. When I moved to Italy and played for Juventus I was a little bit older. Of course they had some problems with doping before my time, but the doctor I worked with there was very good and always helpful.

I think every culture has a very different way of having contact and giving medicine to the players. In Italy, doctors are very close to their players. In Holland, they keep their distance a bit more. It was similar in Spain. Of course, if I ever got sick I'd have a doctor beside me every time. I think it just comes down to culture. I have been lucky in my career and I have not had a big injury. I have met fantastic doctors wherever I have played and that is why they are there, so I haven't had any problems. If I had to choose, I would prefer to have the doctor as my best friend and give him my full confidence but basically it's different in every country depending on the culture.

**What do you think a doctor should do to earn the respect of his players?**

I don't think it is easy for the doctors because they have pressure from the coach and the club but at the same time, he has to protect the health of the players because that is the most important thing. It is not an easy situation. It depends on the personality and character of the doctor. I remember when I was playing in Barcelona the team doctor there had a really hard time. He risked his work for the sake of the players because he wanted to protect them. The coach really put pressure on him and if a coach doesn't like the doctor, he will just employ a new one. That's the way it works. The coach wants to have a doctor that he can work together with, but at the same time the players want a doctor that they believe in. It's not easy being a team doctor, not easy at all.

**How much importance do you give to warming up?**

I think everybody has their own opinion. When you meet one person they will say this is important, the second one will say something totally different and you meet a third person and he says something else. I think it is important to find your own way of doing things. I am 31 so I have a lot of experience. I know my own body and what I need to do.

To be honest, I find warming up very boring. Every time I do the same routine but sometimes I do it at 100%, sometimes I do it less than 80% and sometimes even 50% because mentally, it is very boring. But I think it is something that you have to do because, from my

own experience, warming up makes it much easier to get prepared when you have to give 100% in a game. Of course you have some players who say that stretching and warming up is not necessary and who want to play immediately. I think when you're 15 to 20 years old then it's easy to skip the warm up but as you get older, you have to work more to feel better. I am in that phase now – I have to work hard and warm up to feel good.

**Do you think warming up should be a team activity or an individual one?**

I think you have a collective part and then an individual part. A player can find the individual part by himself because it depends on what kind of body you have, the way you play and the way you think. You find this by yourself by talking to experts like your doctor and physio. But there will always be an element of collective warm up and a team spirit. Today I have the French physical coach and trainer so my regimen is not the same as it was in Italy. That's the collective element, but I still do my individual warm up – that is very important for me. That is something you must do, whichever country you play for.

**Do you pay attention to what you eat?**

In the beginning of my career nutrition was not really important to me. When I came to Ajax we ate what we wanted. It wasn't like today. I think this issue has become important in the last 5 to 10 years. Of course before I wasn't playing at the top level, but for me the focus



**Image:** Ibrahimovic bicycle kicks during a UEFA Champions league group A football match in Zagreb, October 2012.



**Left:** Ibrahimovic playing for Sweden during the FIFA 2014 World Cup qualifier football match vs Faroe Islands, October 2012.

**Below:** Ibrahimovic playing for PSG vs Lorient during a French Ligue 1 match in August, 2011.



has grown over the last 5 years. Today I think every team now has a nutritional adviser who looks out for what we should eat and drink, when to eat and how much and it's become a really important issue. It's something that you learn with experience. When I eat at home now I know what I can eat in relation to how active I am and it becomes something that you are always conscious of.

***You play matches at 8 or 9 pm at night. Can you sleep after a game?***

No, I never sleep after a match. It is impossible because after a match I have too much adrenalin. If I fall asleep it is at about 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning. I try to go to sleep at a reasonable time but it's just not possible.

Coaches are constantly trying to control their players and get them to go to bed but these people can't sleep. I don't think anybody can. I think if you have a coach who has played football himself then he knows and understands this problem. You eventually realise that what is important is what you do the day after, during the recovery. But of course every coach and his staff have their own philosophy.



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***You have kids. Do you want them to become high level athletes like you?***

I think there are a lot of factors that influence what you do in life and I think there is a certain level of destiny. I was lucky to start playing football and I had luck in becoming a top level player like I am now. I also saw the opportunity and understood that it was a big opportunity for me and that it was my only opportunity. You don't get that opportunity twice! But at the same time I have had 10 very stressful, very busy years. I am at the level I am at because I have had good results and that is what is most important and that's what people forget. People forget how much you have to give, what you have to sacrifice, the hard work. There are so many small details that make a difference to you being a successful player that people don't take into account – they just want the glory. But the glory doesn't come if you don't make sacrifices.

For my own children, I just want them to be happy and to choose what they want to do. As long as they're healthy and happy, I will guide them and I will help them. At the moment, if they want to play football, we play football. If they want to play tennis, we play tennis. We also have to think of school. People have an opportunity to go to school and make a successful living from what they've learnt at school, but at the same time, maybe you want to do something else. There is always a question of balance: what you want to do and what you want to give. For me, I had football and school was not as important as football was. Football took all my focus and I personally think that you need to have one focus. If you focus on

two things, eventually one must take priority. That's why it's not easy. There are a lot of factors to consider when you're choosing what you want to do.

***How do you feel when you come here to Doha, Qatar?***

I see big opportunities. The facilities we have trained on are amazing – I have never seen anything like it before, not even in Europe. I have played in many big clubs in my life and I have never seen something like this. It seems like Qatar can create something that seems impossible and it's only that I see it that I know it's possible. When it comes to giving athletes opportunities, you can't find better than this. The only thing I worry about is whether the athletes coming through here are ready to sacrifice. When I was young, I just had a patch of grass and so I trained on that. I never had the opportunity that the kids here have and I wonder if it is a bit too easy. I am from the school where hardship breeds success. I was born and raised in a ghetto in Malmö where we had nothing and had to work hard to come by the opportunities some of these kids have. Since that's my own background, I prefer the route of hard work. But for me, the future is in this part of the world, that's for sure.

***Is there anything else you would like to tell us?***

I think the world is still developing and so many things are improving. When it comes to sports doctors, they are also growing as a profession and although it's not an easy job for them, we learn something new every day so let's make the best of it!

*Nebojsa Popovic M.D., Ph.D.*

