

GSM International Coaching Education Articles for Developing Your Players

Mental Preparation or the Psychology of Preparing Players for matches and Training

The important role of psychology in soccer is becoming increasingly well recognized with many professional clubs throughout the world, and they are employing psychologists to help club staff and players. Sports psychology is sometimes called mental preparation or training, mind games, or mind over matter. The aim is for the team to play soccer at peak performance in every match.

Mental training is no substitute for soccer skills to perform, and it is vital to emphasize the importance of skills, particularly when coaching the developing players in soccer. Since the main aim of mental training is to attain peak or higher performing players in match conditions, it will not help much if your peak performance is poor.

The first step is to decide what you want to achieve for your players. Do you believe your players have a dream that you wish to make a reality? It's important to discover what motivates your players and to write down a mission statement or creed to provide their motivation and to do it with them either one on one or in a group environment.

GOAL SETTING IS A MUST

Goals should be set for the long term, short term, and daily performance achievement levels. A simple example of a goal would be for a player to obtain a regular place in the 1st team, or the local semi-pro team or a college team. A daily goal might be to run faster in a player's wind sprints, or to learn a new attacking one on one trick. A short-term goal might be to run enough speed work to become faster going down the flank if you're a winger, score a certain number of goals, or master a set of new shooting skills. It is important to set realistic goals that are achievable. Becoming professional soccer players is a wish of many young players, but few are successful. It is better to set challenging, but achievable short-term goals.

PERFORMANCE ENHANCING TECHNIQUES YOU CAN USE

After setting goals and finding out what motivates you, there are several performance-enhancing techniques to help achieve these aims:

Sports psychology performance-enhancing techniques in football are increasingly well recognized for their value. Having discovered what motivates you (volition), found a mission or creed, and set goals, there are several performance-enhancing techniques to help achieve these goals. These include relaxation and breathing techniques, mental imagery, concentration and focus, positive self-talk, and confidence building.

BREATHING

Better breathing increases blood flow, improves the circulation, reduces the risk of injury, and decreases the recovery time after a match or training session. Two useful techniques are circle breathing and progressive relaxation. Clear the mind of all distractions, and relax. Then, breathe slowly in through the nose from the center of the body, which is behind the belly button, drawing air upwards to fill the lungs. Breathe in for about four seconds, hold for about two seconds, and then breathe slowly out for four seconds. Repeat 5-10 times.

RELAXATION EXERCISES

Progressive relaxation involves tensing and relaxing each muscle from the neck to the ankles. Tense the muscle while breathing in, hold, and relax on exhaling. The aim is to relax each muscle gradually, and so relax the whole body. There are other relaxation methods, such as meditation, and also methods of controlling the circulation and heart rate.

MENTAL IMAGINING THE REALITY OF THE GAME

Imagery involves imagining a particular action in your mind before actually doing it. For example, before attempting to take a penalty, imagine yourself scoring by kicking the ball exactly where you want it to go. This method can also be used in learning new skills, such as a dribbling trick.

MENTAL FOCUSING

Concentration is all about being focused on the task at hand, and not having your mind cluttered with other thoughts. Footballers, who are focused, are concentrating only on the game to the extent that they might not know what the time is or what the crowd is doing.

Confidence in your ability is an important psychological quality and can be built up by positive self-talk and team building. Optimism is necessary. Linked to this topic is the idea of cohesion. A team that criticizes each other and contains personalities that dislike each other never plays at its best.

The next section concerns peak performance and those factors that cause a sportsman or woman to play at his/her best. Sports psychology is also covered in our soccer coaching program, Soccer Academy. Before finishing, I want to mention time management. This is the skill of getting the most out of your training times. Creating a timetable and writing down a plan is the best way to approach this problem, but above all, football should be fun, and it's essential not to take the enjoyment out of the game.

Soccer Psychology

Many of the top coaches around the world have come to the conclusion that there are essentially three key elements required to be a top soccer and football player.

- **Soccer Ability** – Speed, quickness, soccer movement, strength, power, soccer fitness
- **Technical Skills** – Passing, dribbling, running with the ball, positional sense, shooting
- **Mental Qualities** – Confidence, Commitment, Concentration and Composure

The psychology or mental performance area is designed to improve a coaches' awareness and understanding of why young people play football and soccer and how we can improve the four C's in players, Confidence, Commitment, Concentration, and Composure.

The psychology chapter also focuses on and provides practical tips and help on:

- Understanding and improving these essential mental qualities that make such a difference to soccer or football players performance.
- Simple methods in how a coach can use mental training skills within a soccer coaching program.

- Motivate soccer players so they can develop both as players and people.

If as soccer coaches we have a better understanding of how we can improve and develop a soccer player's mental strengths and skills, then both players and coaches can learn how to become better and how to have more fun and enjoyment of the beautiful game thru psychology or mental performance.

Most coaches spend lots of time and energy striving to improve the technical and soccer abilities of their players but pay scant regard to what many people think is the most important muscle in the body – the brain. Understanding football and soccer psychology will help you to improve as a coach.

There is no doubt that a confident soccer player, with self-belief, is by far a better player than one who lacks confidence and belief. Every soccer coach wants their players to be committed, focused and motivated.