

GSM International Coaching Education Articles for Developing Your Players

STRESS, ANXIETY and RELAXATION FOR SOCCER PLAYERS ARE IMPORTANT

INTRODUCTION

The pressure experienced by soccer players especially at a professional level is recognized as influencing playing performance. Heavy playing schedules, competition for team places, the media and fans as well as the pressure to win trophies all play a part in players developing high stress and anxiety levels. Even experienced players can suffer from pre-match stress. Developing ways to control this is important to prevent players from falling apart.

THE REALITIES OF PLAYER STRESS and ANXIETY

Research says, *“The psycho-physiological responses of the individual to any influence which disturbs his inner-balance.”* These psycho-physiological changes do however depend on the individual's tolerance to stress. Stress as mentioned earlier can be due to many environmental factors although illness and nutrition can also play a role. The individual players' reaction to stress can involve aggression and anger or inversely, inhibition, regression, and fear. Players are more at risk of injury when stressed due to their attention levels being disorientated.

Sports Psychologists can measure stress levels through specially designed questionnaires and by using measurements of heart rates to discover the psycho physiological stress levels. The body prepares for stress through the fight-flight reaction which is the response of the body preparing for action via increased heart and breathing rate and the secretion of adrenaline.

Anxiety involves a feeling of fear or a perception of threat and which may be peculiar to a particular situation. Possible symptoms are nausea, loss of composure, reduced motor coordination and aggression. Potential stressors are the climate - temperature/humidity, circadian body rhythms - the maximum effort is harder in the morning, jet-lag, playing environment - the stadium, spectators, surface, game officials and finally stress created by opponents or between players and the coach. The intensity of these influences on stress depends on the individual perception or inner experience of the player.

When players are alert but relaxed, they can make better, quicker decisions during a match. An over-anxious player will often make incorrect decisions. Players can as well be more motivated when they realize that they can control their anxiety and are then free to play at their top level.

By getting to know a player well, a coach can sometimes diagnose why he is over-anxious. However, it may be difficult to get through to players suffering from anxiety thus much discretion is needed. A coach can look for various signs such as moments of anger or loss of confidence and players who no longer utilize their skills correctly. Players can as well become isolated and hide away from their team mates or become aggressive and blame everyone else for their problems. A good example is the center-forward who has not scored for several games which may blame the lack of decent service.

RELAXATION

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ABOUT STRESS and ANXIETY

As a consequence of stress and anxiety, those involved in soccer especially at top levels are realizing the need for pre-competition relaxation strategies. Helping the mental state of players will have a positive effect on the physical condition of them. Players using relaxation techniques may be able to control their thinking to remove tension and conserve energy. According to Bill Beswick a sports psychologist who has worked in top level football for many years, the ideal performance state for a soccer player is that of "relaxed readiness" - possessing energy without tension.

It must be mentioned that no relaxation technique is the best. Players should try various techniques until they find one they like and practice it (perhaps 1 or 2 times per day) so it can be used as a means to help in difficult moments. Many athletes seem to use Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) which allows players to learn the difference between relaxation and tension. The player should lie comfortably, close eyes, breathe easily, tense then relax all muscles and maintain a passive attitude.

Some techniques also use different muscle tense-relax exercises along with breathing exercises and meditation. Deep muscle relaxation is another procedure often used. A player forces his attention onto his left leg for example and imagines it getting heavier and heavier and eventually letting it sink into the floor! Relaxation should result in decreased heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate and reduced body metabolism.

Anxiety can also strike during a game for example after a mistake. Here are five useful tips on how to recover from this. Try them yourself when you need them and then teach your players.

1. Recover breathing control
2. Ease the tension out of the body
3. Talk yourself back into the positive
4. Let the fear go
5. Review your goals and reactivate yourself towards an achievement.

Dedicated books and tapes are available containing detailed methods for relaxing. However, before using deep relaxing techniques, it is advised that any subject with a physical or mental disorder should consult their doctor.

Finally, some soccer coaches or players may not like using relaxation techniques. Other methods such as giving each player clear and precise instructions about his tasks and responsibilities (during the team-talk), giving objective information about the opposing team, explaining the risks to be taken and support he will have and giving praise may help to relax players and take their mind away a little from the game.

CONCLUSION

In soccer, players may need to develop relaxation skills to counter moments of stress and anxiety which are interrelated. Not only does relaxation help reduce stress and anxiety but can facilitate rest and recovery. Players also need to develop a positive way of looking at the game during moments of difficulty. The coach needs to be aware of the various signs and symptoms of players suffering from stress and anxiety. A Sports Psychologist can help players to reach and stay at their maximal potential.