In the previous edition of The Boot Room we provided some ideas for how psychological development can be planned for and developed in an integrated and systematic way alongside technical work. In this article we show an example of using the 5Cs on the pitch, highlighting the area of concentration - which links closely to the broader issue themes of decision-making and game realistic practices.

Concentration plays a key role in regulating the quality of a player’s performance. It reflects a player’s ability to sustain and switch attention effectively during play. The quality of concentration is determined by two factors:

- **Attentional Scan** (i.e., where their focus of attention is placed. Is where he/she looks, what he/she thinks, or says to himself/herself relevant to the task?)
- **Attention Span** (i.e., the ability to remain focused and/or hold attention on certain objects, people, thoughts or feelings for a required length of time without being distracted)

**Developing the most focused player**

The grid on the next page is a simple way to explain where a players’ attention could be placed at any given time, and could be useful in helping to target concentration coaching in training.

As players mature they should be comfortable working in each of the four channels, and be able to switch very quickly from one channel to another even when under severe pressure (e.g. from ball to teammates).

**Focus on the right thing, at the right time**

Those players with great attentional skills develop a very clear understanding of what is happening in the game around them (pictures), as well as how they can make a difference. This game intelligence is a hallmark of the elite modern professional.

Nevertheless, players can suffer from a poor attentional focus, focussing on things that are essentially irrelevant to their immediate performance, such as arguing with the referee or simply lacking vision for what is around them. Concentration coaching therefore will train the players’ focus of decision-making so that performance is consistently optimised.

**Coaching Summary**

Commitment to practicing and rehearsing the ability to focus and sustain focus on the right things in training will help a player to maximise the robustness of his/her concentration in a match. There is no doubt that concentration is a skill most tested under pressure and, therefore, it needs to be conditioned to hold up against pressure in training and matches.

**Player Challenges**

Try these challenges to help develop your players’ concentration skills:

- What are your key distractions (internal and external). How can you block these out?
- Identify and maintain your ‘right focus’ when the team is in possession, out of possession, and at set plays.
- During matches, when your team wins the ball, or loses the ball, how quickly can you scan all around you to put yourself in the best position?

Four coaching strategies for developing concentration were highlighted in the previous issue, these centred on using game-realistic practices, and helping players to become more aware of task-relevant cues and triggers. Praise and reinforcement from the coach should then focus on highlighting and rewarding attention to these cues.
A player with excellent concentration
- Adopts the right positions in open play and refocuses quickly after a break in play
- Is very aware of the movements of teammates and use of space
- Helps others to stay focused
- Is able to vary the intensity of concentration in response to transitions on the pitch

A player with poor concentration
- Will be easily distracted
- Drifts out of position
- Fails to refocus quickly after a mistake or break in play

"What people don’t realise is that it’s obviously a physical game, but after the game, mentally, you’re tired as well. Your mind has been through so much. There’s so many decisions you have to make. And then you’re trying to calculate other people’s decisions as well. It’s probably more mentally tiring than physically, to be honest."

Wayne Rooney

NARROW – EXTERNAL
What will my players be focusing on here?
- The ball
- Teammate
- Opponent
- Focusing on target/accuracy
Role in Performance: Targeting/Performing

BROAD – EXTERNAL
What will my players be focusing on here?
- Teammates in open play
- Identifying open space to move into
- Opposition positioning
- Awareness of ‘bigger picture’
Role in Performance: Scanning

NARROW – INTERNAL
What will my players be focusing on here?
An internal thought, image or feeling such as:
- Feeling of contact of ball on boot
- Positive thought/self-talk response after an event (good/bad pass etc)
- Trigger/motivational word before kicking/heading
Role in Performance: Responding/Preparing

BROAD – INTERNAL
What will my players be focusing on here?
- Thinking through strategy
- Planning where to pass given multiple options
- Multiple thought processes
Role in Performance: Decision making

Communication
- Postures
- Patterns
- Visual and verbal triggers

Concentration
- Visual skills
- Scan
- Dual-task

Commitment
- Movement skills

Emotional Control
- Decision-making
- Tactical knowledge
- Game plan and state

Confidence
- Technical skills

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**WARM UP – SUPPORT PLAY**

**Practice Set Up**
- An area of 40x40 yards, with three scoring circles positioned in the grid
- Amend the size of the area as necessary according to the age and ability of the players in the group
- 6 red players playing against 6 blue players
- Two yellow target players operate between the three scoring circles

**Practice Organisation**
- Both teams compete for possession
- The target players are free to move between all of the scoring circles
- To score, one of the target players must receive a pass in a scoring circle
- If a goal is scored the ball returns to the attacking team and they look to score in a different circle
- The first team to score 10 points wins

**To Add Concentration**
- Run the practice without verbal communication to force the players to be constantly scanning the pitch
- Ask the players to focus on the weight and feel of their passes and tracking it to their teammate with their eyes. Concentrate on replicating those feelings and the weight of ‘good’ passes to their teammates
- The target player cannot be in the scoring circle until after the pass has been played. This will force the players to focus on the feel of the contact of the ball and constantly scanning the pitch and organise through visual triggers only
- Ball dead when it goes out of playing area or over a dimmer switch (during breaks, and turn up again for restarts)

**MAIN SESSION EXERCISE – TRIGGER WORD SMALL SIDED GAME**

**Practice Set Up**
- Set up a playing area of 40x25 yards with goals at each end and a halfway line marked
- Amend the size of the area as necessary according to the age and ability of the players in the group
- Two teams of four players, each with a goalkeeper

**Practice Organisation**
- Play a normal match
- One player per team is designated as the team captain
- When a team loses possession of the ball, the team captain must decide whether the team is to defend in the attacking half, or drop and defend in the defending half
- If the team captain decides to defend in the attacking half, the team captain shouts “Press!”
- The whole team then must defend in the attacking half
- If the team captain decides to defend in the defensive half, the team captain shouts “Drop!”
- The whole team then must defend in the defending half
- Goals count double if the defending team occupy both halves of the pitch

**To Add Concentration**
- Develop the use of the trigger words “Press” and “Drop” making sure the players use them at the appropriate moments
- Practice without verbal communication. The players now have to react to the actions of the first defender and read the cues as to whether they can pressurise the ball or not

**GAME RELATED PRACTICE – QUICK REACTIONS WORLD-CUP**

**Practice Set Up**
- Practice takes place in a 20x18 area — width of the 6-yard box and the distance from the goal line to the edge of the penalty area. 7 players - GK and 3 pairs. Server in the D with a supply of balls

**Practice Organisation**
- Work as a pair to shoot and score
- Pairs can combine so that there are always 4 defenders v 2 attackers
- Ball dead when it goes out of playing area or goal is scored
- Restart from server – varied angle and pace of serve. Allow players to recover between service
- Competition between the players for 2-min. Use 6 fielders and rotate players off (and GK). Establish winning pair on knock out basis

**To Add Concentration**
- This practice works concentration at 100% intensity and tests GK reactions in tight situations in the penalty area where they are called upon to make saves from short distances and react to the unexpected. This intensity can’t be maintained for a whole 90 mins of a game
- Encourage GK to drop intensity (like a dimmer switch) during breaks, and turn up again for restarts
- Read posture, movements and advanced cues to anticipate shots, direction, power etc