

TOP FIVE TIPS

Sports Psychologist, Dr Chris Harwood, from Loughborough University draws upon his experience of working with professional teams to provide Five Key Applications of the Mentally Skilled Coach



Many coaches recognise that they are applying the principles of sport psychology every time they set up a drill in training, select the team, address a player, react to mistakes, and give feedback after a game. These are natural elements of the coaching cycle from 'training pitch to match day', each with its own set of coaching behaviours that have a psychological impact on the player. The key to effective psychological coaching revolves around the coach's ability to recognise methods through which they will have a consistently positive impact on a player's commitment, communication skills, concentration, control and confidence. These 5 C's are basic constituents of mental toughness in a team sport such as football, and their 'availability' on match day can be greatly influenced by a mentally astute coach. From

experience of working in professional football, here are the five critical features of such a coach in terms of the quality of their personal interaction with players and attention to psychological detail.

Build *player-centered* as opposed to *coach-driven* relationships

In the past, you will have known, coached or played with many players who appeared to be naturally motivated for football - ones where their commitment was never questioned and who appeared to need little attention from the coach. Nowadays there are potentially more influences, such as money, which can negatively affect the *consistency* of a player's motivation. However, alongside this factor, this generation of players respect and value a

stronger and more proactive coach-player relationship; a coach who understands them as players (and people) and is able to fulfill a developmental 'mentoring' role.

A coach fulfilling this role positively affects the *consistency* of a player's motivation, regardless of the money players earn. Most young professional players have been nurtured by supportive coaches through their academy years who offered both positive and constructive feedback to help motivate them further. The coach who is able to understand and empathise with the different 'world' in which professional players exist has a priceless attribute. The psychological 'world' of a regular first team player is far different from the 'world' of a fringe player who spends vast amounts of time on the bench. How

should coaches deal with these two different worlds? How does the coach is relationship with these two players motivate them further?



A player-centered relationship with these players would include individual attention to their goal setting, as well as individualized feedback on areas of strength and areas for improvement. Simply stated, coaches should consider the individual demands facing each player, and honestly appraise whether their relationship with each player serves to optimize motivation and performance in training and matches. Walk a mile in their shoes occasionally!

Create conditions in training that condition mental toughness

Coaches with knowledge of sport psychology know how to integrate mental skills training into technical or physical practices. The pitch is the player's office and the same management skills of concentration, communication and self-control apply in training as they do on match day. In fact, these skills are developed and perfected for match day with a smart

coach who reminds players of their importance and sets up appropriate tests in training. Every segment of training has the potential to activate and elevate the 5 C's so that they are well conditioned not only for a match, and for players who need to improve their psychological responses to game events. Some examples that provide *tests* of concentration, self-control and communication include:

- Small-to-large-sided games with bad refereeing decisions that are biased against one side, or consistently mixed for both teams. (e.g., a free-kick is upgraded to a penalty if an opposing team member reacts negatively to a decision and loses focus).
- Games where the key goal is to practice the perfect response to mistakes or positive communication with teammates either verbally or visually (e.g., half of the team can only communicate visually, while the other half can only provide verbal instructions and



- encouragement. Swap over).
- *Silent versus Vibrant football:* only two players on a team can communicate or speak.

The rest must be silent. Every one to two minutes, swap to another two players, and then gradually build up so that four, six, eight players and then the whole team turn the pitch into a vibrant source of energy: just like turning a volume control button. This is a great drill to assess communication skills in players and improve them, as well as to make players simply more aware of the importance of effective communication.

- A foul is awarded to an opposing team if a team member's *good* play is not reinforced or praised by a single teammate.
- Calling *trigger* words that have been agreed by the team to raise intensity/tempo or to slow things down (e.g., *fire*: intensify energy, speed, press; *ice*: cool it, slow, patience) during certain momentum phases of the game (e.g., 1-0 up/down with 5 minutes to go)

Every technical, tactical or physical drill can include *reinforcement* conditions that help develop some sort of mental toughness response at a team or individual level. Try them out!

Encourage the team to develop its own identity and set of rules

Team-building by coaches is more than just taking players paint-balling or climbing trees – it is about the expectations that teammates have of each other as a result of working together in such activities. Successful teams are usually those who have created their own unique identity, ones with qualities that they know distinguish them from other teams in the league. In the pre-season period, the smart coach recognises that the measure of a good team is the quality of relationships between the players and agreement on the shared expectations that each have of each other in training and matches. This, however, needs formal work through meetings and sessions with the team to establish these 'Expectations of Excellence that define us as a squad'.

A sport psychologist working with the coach can facilitate this and provide a working document for players developed by the players. This is something that yourself and the players can constantly refer to throughout the season and monitor as an appraisal of their 'collective mental performance' for that week/match.

Hear the music.....and know the routine!

Music plays a massive role in professional match preparation both at a team and individual level. Psychologically it is almost a scientific law that

appropriately chosen music can have a positive effect on players' arousal, excitement, enjoyment, mental preparation and confidence levels. Listening to music probably forms an important component of the player's individual mental and physical routine on match day, as does dressing room music as part of the team's routine.

The key point is to pay attention to the routines of your players on match day; establish whether they have a routine that allows them to enter the field of play – confident, focused, and ready to unleash hell amongst the opposition. Some players may not know how to spend their time optimally in the build up to a match, and waste valuable opportunities (time-wise) to activate a prepared state of mind. Conducting a session where players discuss their routines with each other can help coaches assess the player and provide more knowledge to the squad as a whole. The use of music may be raised, and players might be interested in the development of a music play-list for the dressing room.

Review the match professionally – win, lose or draw

Coaches, managers, and players need a period of time after a match to let the *outcome sink in* and the *emotions sink out* – regardless of the score.

Some coaches struggle with their emotional side – they bring a negative mood to training after a loss (when the team may have performed well) and a positive mood after a win (when the team may have performed poorly).

Emotional coaches tend to have difficulty separating the performance from the outcome. This can be a frustration for players who, whether they realize it or not, benefit immensely from accurate feedback on their performances associated with the score. Impacting on players psychologically after a game is about providing them with the opportunity of a professional review – from the perspective of coach and player.



The systems available for this process range from the humble video and meeting room to sophisticated player/team analysis systems such as ProZone. It is a *science* for the coach to collect the information on 'what happened in the match' and an *art* to deliver it in a manner that will motivate and empower players for the next training session. The key here is *consistency*. Reviews don't happen simply after losing. After all, the difference between a win, loss or draw

could simply be a coat of paint on the goal post!

Summary

Coaches that consider and employ each of these five themes or qualities carefully and consistently will develop a coaching system that maximizes the use of some fundamental psychological principles. Time is a factor here, but hopefully these are methods which are about working smarter as opposed to harder.

Further Reading

Beswick, B. (2001). *Focused for Soccer*. Human Kinetics: Champaign, Illinois.

Higham, A., Harwood, C. and Cale, A. (2005) *Momentum in Soccer: Controlling the Game*. Coachwise Publications: Leeds.