



OUR PRIDE, OUR STORY, OUR LEGACY

USING THE 5Cs WITH THE COOK ISLANDS NATIONAL TEAM

In September 2015, the Cook Islands embarked on their qualification campaign in the Oceania Football Confederation section of the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Taking part in Round 1 of qualification, they travelled to Tonga to play a round-robin tournament against Samoa, American Samoa, and hosts Tonga. Here Head of Player Development, Richard Anderson, details how the Cook Islands National Team utilised the 5Cs of commitment, communication, concentration, control and confidence, to help the nation reach their best ever World Cup Qualifying performance.

BACKGROUND

The Cook Islands are FIFA's smallest affiliated nation. At the start of the 2018 World Cup Qualification campaign, they were ranked as the lowest ranked nation in Oceania and joint-bottom of the FIFA World Rankings (209th out of 209). Traditionally the Cook Islands does not have a football culture. Football trails Rugby League as the nation's primary sport, and there are only 700 male participants registered across all age groups. They compete in the domestic league across a season that is only 14 weeks in duration.

The history of Cook Island National Team reads thus: no previous win in a World Cup Qualifier from six previous attempts and no win in a fixture against any other affiliated nation. In qualification for the previous World Cup the Cook Islands finished bottom with a single point.

The squad of 2015 consisted of 6 domestic based players, 3 players from Australia and 10 players from New Zealand. 13 out of the squad of 19 were uncapped players and the average number of caps within the rest of the squad was 1.9 making us the least experienced team at the tournament. We were also the youngest with an average age of 22.1 years. It was with this that we embarked on our World Cup Qualification campaign.



OUR 5C CORE QUALITIES

We highlighted very early on that one of the biggest challenges to overcome would be in attempting to form a cohesive squad both on and off the pitch. We had scarce time in order to unite a 19-man playing squad from three different countries, and 7 staff members that included two further nationalities, all of whom had never worked together before and mostly didn't know each other. We needed to ensure we were able to operate as a team as quickly as possible. It was through implementing a structured 5C program that we felt gave us the best chance of achieving this.

Predominantly the 5Cs is a program aimed at increasing awareness and confidence in a coach's own ability to coach important psycho-social skills, in order to develop these attributes in their players. The 5Cs relates to the skills of commitment, communication, concentration, control and confidence (see figure 1).

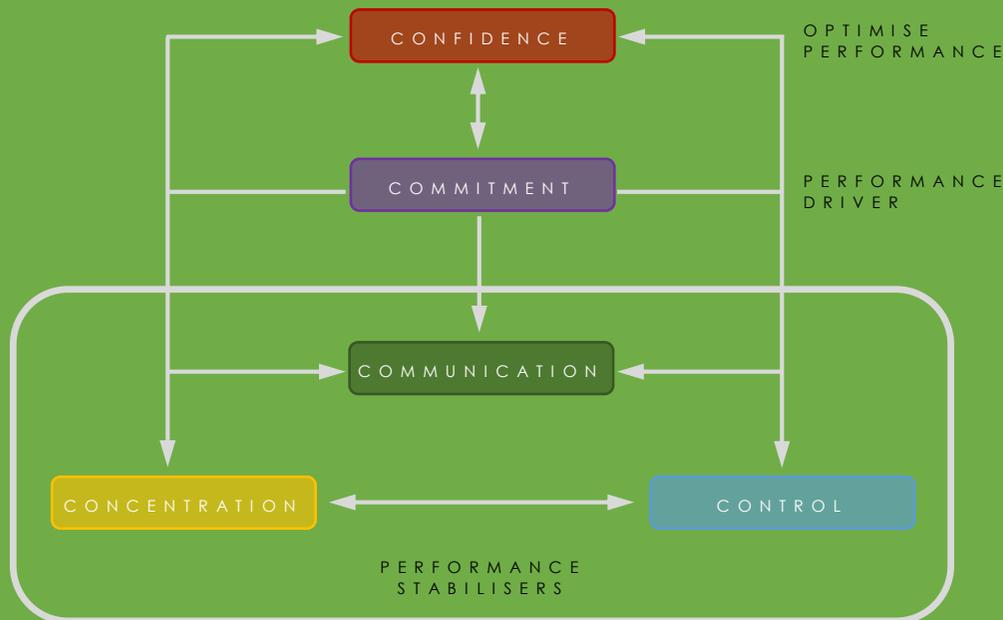


Figure 1: The 5Cs

These skills reflect the key motivational, self-regulatory and interpersonal abilities that are indicative properties of mentally tough and leadership-intelligent footballers. As a program the 5C provides clear insights and practical ideas around integrating the principles and techniques of sport psychology into a coach's natural coaching process.

Each C can be broken down into specific skills and behaviours that are a reflection on the degree to which any given player demonstrates the Cs. For example, a player who shows an unconditional effort to close down an opponent who is in possession and deny them time and space, would be described as showing high levels of commitment.

As a coaching staff we set about identifying those behaviours we believed the players needed to demonstrate to be successful in progressing in the World Cup Qualification process. This list was intended as an internal exercise to ensure the coaching staff were on the same page, and could help facilitate group discussion amongst the players during our scheduled



training camp. After producing exhaustive lists for each of the Cs, we set about trying to prioritise those skills and behaviours that were most appropriate for the roles and functions within our team. It was at this point we ran into difficulty.

Collectively we came to the consensus that it was more beneficial for every player to be proficient in demonstrating these behaviours. Whilst we believed it was a noble endeavour in trying to tie in our identified 5Cs behaviours with the specific *player tasks* we would set the players for their role, we didn't think it was more or less important for our central defenders to show a relaxed alertness away from the ball in order to be ready to defend against a counter attack, compared to our striker when the ball was in our defensive third. We fully expected natural individual difference between players in the degree they would exhibit the 5C behaviours, but these would be more based on the players personality, traits and experience, and not specifically on the position or function they held in the team.

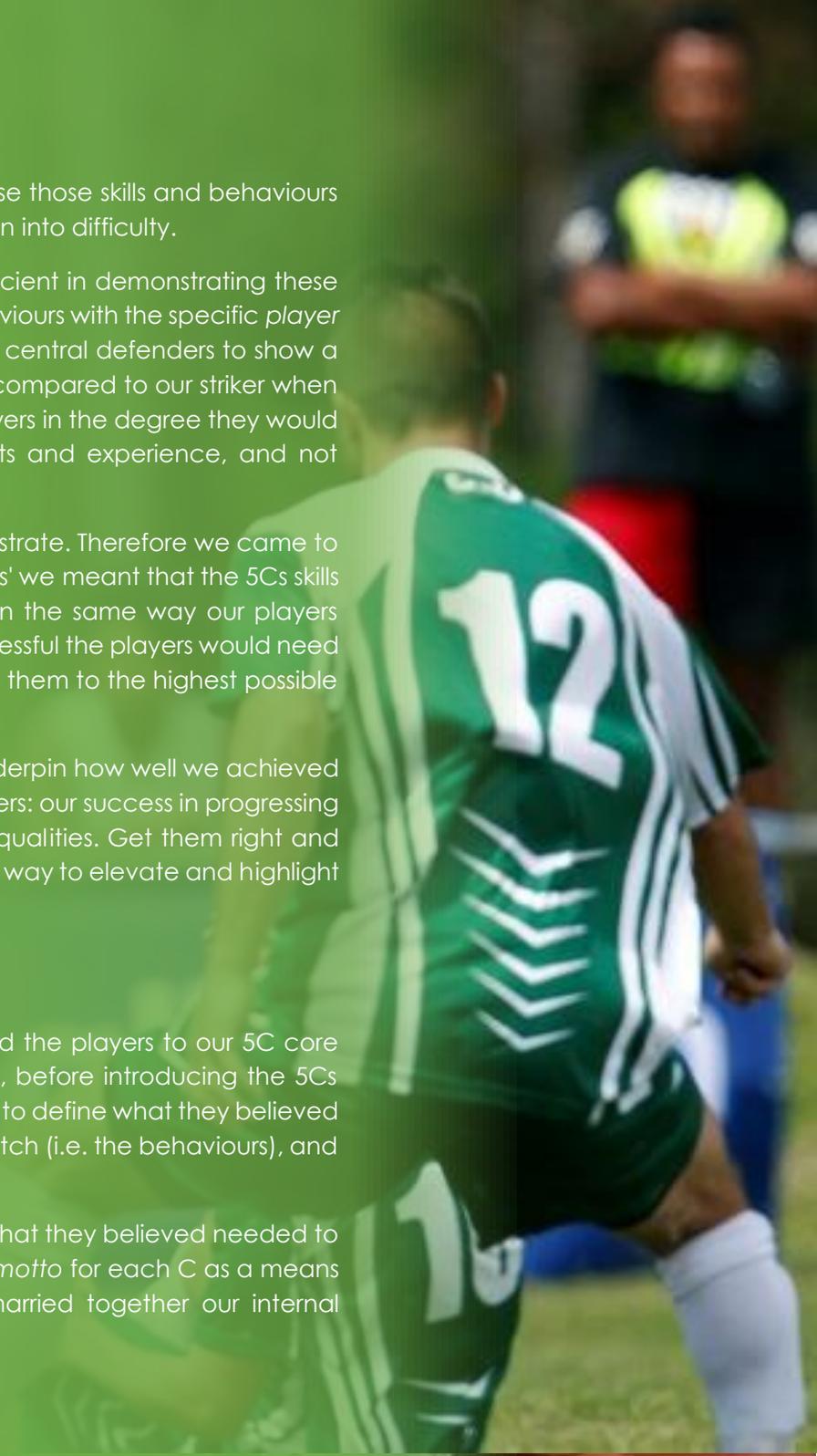
We also had not limited ourselves to on the pitch behaviours that the players needed to demonstrate. Therefore we came to the conclusion that the 5Cs themselves would be best served as a set of 'constants'. By 'constants' we meant that the 5Cs skills and behaviours would need to be present in everything we did both on and off the pitch, in the same way our players constantly had to demonstrate high levels of technical execution without fail. In order to be successful the players would need to show their 5Cs every day, develop them before, during and after every training and perform them to the highest possible standard in every match.

We called these our *core qualities*. Our ability to perform these core qualities would serve to underpin how well we achieved the set team, unit and player tasks in training and matches. This **is** also how we sold it to the players: our success in progressing further in the tournament would be greatly determined by how well we showed our 5C core qualities. Get them right and we'd qualify; let them slip and we would fall short. It was important for us to position the 5Cs in this way to elevate and highlight their importance in order to establish player buy-in.

WORKING WITH THE PLAYERS

On the afternoon on the first day of our pre-World Cup Qualifiers training camp we introduced the players to our 5C core qualities. We began by explaining the need for, and purpose in having these 5 core qualities, before introducing the 5Cs themselves. Splitting the squad into smaller groups, we took each C in turn and asked the players to define what they believed was meant by each C, identify how we will demonstrate that C each day both on and off the pitch (i.e. the behaviours), and consider what the tournament might throw at us that may test our 5C core qualities.

In the end the players identified and agreed on fifty different behaviours across each of the Cs that they believed needed to be constant day-in and day-out in order for us to be successful. The players then developed a *motto* for each C as a means by which to encapsulate our core quality behaviours, and an overarching *mantra* that married together our internal expectations for the tournament with our core qualities.



We then subsequently explained to the players how we would monitor how effectively we were showing our core qualities. Because we were conscious of not overburdening the players with the performance related monitoring we were implementing and the short timescale we had to develop a coherent playing style, we elected for three simple measures of our core values. Firstly we would rely on individual subjective assessment answering the question “*how well do you think we showed our core qualities today?*” and took a global score out of 10 (see figure 2). Secondly we would look to film examples of players displaying our 5C core qualities during training, to edit and show back as best practice examples in post-session debriefs and constantly reinforce their importance. Finally we utilised our *player leadership group* as a means of getting the players feedback on areas of our core qualities they felt we were excelling, and areas where we needed to focus more on. In the condensed preparation time we had, we felt that these three methods would allow us to keep on top of how well the players were assimilating the 5Cs.

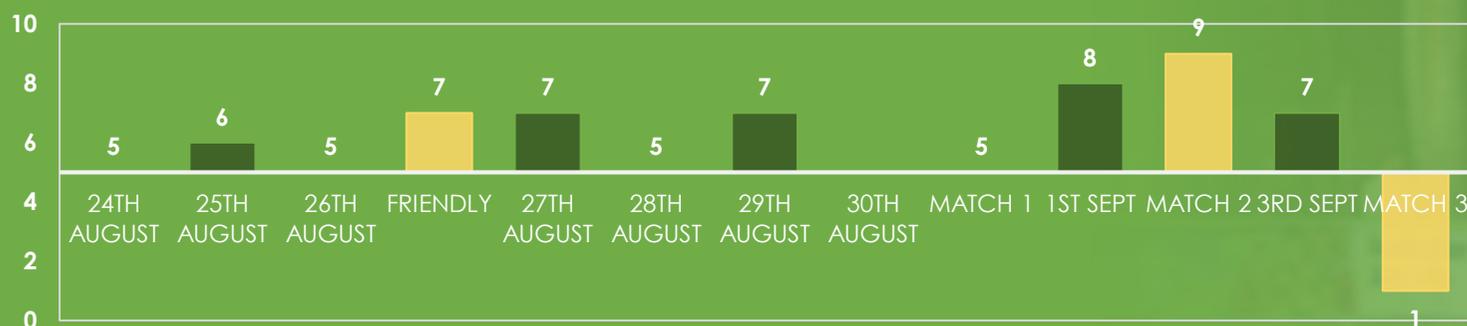


Figure 2: Example player core qualities scores

THE TOURNAMENT

When it came to the tournament itself our 5C core qualities were both the making and breaking of our continued involvement in the qualification process. We made sure to continue to reiterate the message of how important our core qualities would be to us in order to qualify and reinforced this through various visual reminders for players (see figure 3).

It was in our match against Samoa whereby we arguably saw the best example of our core qualities in action. One of our central midfielders had started the game poorly. It was abundantly clear that he was becoming frustrated by it. Whilst no-one would fault him for the effort he was expending for the team, he was arguably trying too hard to make up for his poor start. The more he tried, the more mistakes he made and the further frustration he experienced.



It was during a stoppage in play the player was called over to touchline. He was reminded of the core qualities and relevant, specific behaviours that the team had come up with, and told to simply focus on showing them for the proceeding 5 minutes.



Figure 3: 5C Core Qualities Poster

WHERE NEXT?

The use of the 5Cs formed only part of the wider performance environment we created during the short time we spent together as a squad, trying to progress to the next phase of the World Cup Qualification process. Nevertheless we believed it to be a very valuable and beneficial component. In spite of failing to reach the next phase it was arguably the most successful element in trying to form a cohesive squad. Its contribution towards helping the Cook Islands National Team in achieving their best ever World Cup Qualification performance, and climb 43 places in the FIFA World Rankings to its highest ever position of 166th cannot be underestimated in our opinion.

Positioning the 5Cs as *core qualities* served to set a series of clear and player-driven values that each player took responsibility for enacting. They also ensured that their teammates upheld our core qualities too. As a result both on and off the pitch we didn't require the fall back of codes of conduct, set rules for the players to follow, or needed to cajole players into working harder as they took ownership of themselves.

Following the game the player acknowledged how valuable this 'reset' had been in helping him re-establish his focus. He said it allowed him to build his confidence and gave him the belief to step up to score the free kick that ultimately won the game.

Going into our final game against American Samoa we experienced the drawback of not being able to undertake a longer period to teach, to train and to test our core qualities. With the added pressure of us only requiring a draw to qualify, players started to become anxious. This was no more evident than the two goals we conceded. With the clock ticking away we gave away two freekicks on the edge of our box that would have unlikely been committed in less pressurised circumstances. In both situations our concentration and control core qualities were evidently not as engrained as they needed to be, as the players failed to demonstrate clear thinking under pressure. It ultimately cost us.





Whilst we felt that we had made great strides in such a short space of time in fostering our 5C core qualities, the timescale we had to achieve it was most certainly not ideal. With only a week to introduce and gain buy-in from the players prior to our first competitive fixture, it is unsurprising that when they were tested seriously for the first time, our core quality behaviours had not been developed enough to see us through.

Upon reflection we believe we could have influenced our core qualities better had we designated a specific coach to manage their integration on and off the pitch. We also will seek to assess each individual C as opposed to taking a global score. Through this we believe it will help in our understanding of how our 5C core qualities are being developed, as they are woven into the fabric of our team model and team building process.

From this experience we have now been able to plan more thoroughly and develop a long-term strategy to roll out the 5C core qualities across all of our National Youth Teams. Through this we hope to be able to develop player-driven, cohesive teams that are made up of mentally tough and leadership-intelligent footballers.

For more information about the 5Cs

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