

Sports Psychology

How to improve your game with the right mental preparation.

What is sports psychology?

Sports psychology is the scientific study of the mind, mental state and behaviour of the athlete in the sporting environment.

How important is it and what do players do at the elite level?

The mental aspect has a huge impact on sports performance and it's just as important as the physical side of the game. At the elite level, not only do players work on developing their physical preparation, they spend a lot of time on the mental aspects.

How much of a player's performance is affected by the mental aspects?

There is no definite or clear-cut answer. It's a difficult thing to measure and it depends on who you talk to. Some say it's 90% mental and 10% physical. My view is that, as you get to the elite level, the mental aspects become very important and have a significant impact, so it's a very important factor for young players to work on.

What simple things can players do to improve their mental preparation?

The most important thing for young players is to do things consistently. For example, if you have a great game or training session, the key is to look at the things you did well, then try to repeat that time and time again.

Is having a set routine an important part of mental preparation?

It is an absolutely essential part of a player's preparation. It's all about having your own set routine. So what suits one person may not necessarily apply to you. We have elite players who schedule and plan everything they do from the moment they wake up one game day.

Elite players use personal music players as a form of preparation. What is your opinion on using music as a part of mental preparation?

When doing any form of mental preparation it's important to do what best suits you. So if music makes you play better, then use this as a part of your preparation. If you use music occasionally and it doesn't make you play better, then you're better off not using it.

What types of players are there in the change room?

There are three types. There are those with iPods in their ears, trying to focus on the game. Then there's the clown, who is jumping around and talking to everyone. And there are those who sit quietly and don't say much. The key is to find what suits you the best.

How can players reduce their level of nervousness? In particular, before a big game?

The key to reducing nervousness is recognising and accepting that you will get nervous. In addition, you need to recognise the signs that your nervousness is rising – for example, an increase in heart or breathing rate. The key is to take a couple of deep breaths and focus on calming yourself.

How can I use mental preparation in pressure situations during the game, for example when taking a penalty?

Let's take the example of Mark Viduka in the 2005 World Cup Qualifier against Uruguay. The keys once again are to:

- Recognise the level of nervousness and try to reduce your jitteriness.
- Practise. Think back and imagine you are at training, taking the penalty kick in that environment. Take the penalty exactly the same way you would at training and don't change anything on the game day.

What happened to Mark Viduka was he changed his mind as he went through the action of taking that kick. That little stutter step threw him off and he subsequently missed the target.

It's important that you should treat training in the same way in the same way you would treat a match situation, the only difference being the added pressure. It should be an automatic process that you practise at training.

For example, you might place the ball on the spot, take five steps back and then strike the ball. The important thing is to find your own technique, practise it and stick to it.

How important is it for players to reflect on their performance by using a diary?

It is a beneficial and important part of your development as it enables you to reflect on how you're thinking and how you're feeling. You can get a great indication of how certain situations effect your performance.

Players could keep a diary containing information such as the day of training, food eaten, how they felt and what they thought of their own performances. This measure of recording information enables you to reflect on your development and performance on a daily basis.

A simple way of assessing your performance by using a diary would be to write down:

- What you did well.
- What you could do better.
- How you will do it better next time.

Keeping a record such as this allows you to see the areas you need to work on. Other entries might include how you felt – good, bad, happy, not happy etc. Being aware of how you feel is an important part of this diary as it allows you to express your feelings and get it out into the open. From there, it's important to move on.

Many players experience disappointment in a variety of circumstances: for instance, not being selected for the team or losing an important game. What are the best ways to deal with disappointment?

There are two ways to look at this. First, you need to recognise that all players experience disappointment and that mistakes are a significant part of sport. Acknowledging these facts is the first way to handle disappointment.

Second, have balance in your life so that sport is not the only important thing in it. This is why your family, friends and a social life are all important. You need to balance these aspects of your life, which form a necessary part of the support and structure that will enable you to handle disappointment.

Setting new goal is another vital part of dealing with disappointment. In particular, you can say to yourself, "I haven't made the grade now, but what can I do to achieve my goals in the future?"

GOAL SETTING

The important thing is to keep it simple and look at what you need to do to achieve your goal. For example, your goal might be to play for the Phoenix. To achieve this goal, you need to look at the areas of your game that you need to improve – for example, your first touch, defensive skills and passing.

TIPS FOR YOUR COACH

Coaches often call out, "Concentrate! Focus!" This may confuse you. What do they mean?

If your coach does yell out these commands, simply ask him the question, "Concentrate on what?" This is a question that will enable you to get the specific information you require from your coach.

A good coach's answer would be something like: "Concentrate on your first touch!"

IMPROVING YOUR GAME

The best way to improve your game is to love and enjoy the experience of playing. Take in the smell of the grass, the training, being with your friends, the fun of the game – and enjoy it!