

7

The psychological aspect

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1. Mental training

Being determined, taking risks, showing aggressiveness and working for the rest of the team are just some of the positive mental attitudes that can be seen in players during a match or training session. But players can also display negative tendencies as well, such as letting their heads and arms drop after losing a duel, showing a lack of willpower, doubting their own ability, being afraid to shoot or lacking concentration. Negative mental attitudes lead to a drop in performance level and to a slowing down of the learning process and to the progress made by players. Top-class players distinguish themselves from the good, middle-of-the-road players by their ability to cope mentally. A strong mental approach is one of the key elements that make up their talent.

As with other performance-related factors (technical, tactical and athletic skills), the psychological aspect can be developed and consolidated both on the pitch and with specific mental preparation.

The goal of mental training

- Mental training is aimed at improving mental attitudes, but also at aiding the improvement of performance-related elements through techniques that utilise the qualities and resources of our brain.

In this chapter, before looking at the contents of a training session on the pitch to work on mental aspects, we shall deal with a list of mental attitudes that have an influence on performance.

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Mental attitudes that can be worked on

Concentration, attention, precision

- Players must know how to process the right information at the right time
- They must be able to focus their attention and maintain that focus
- They need to be able to remain concentrated for long periods
- They have to avoid making glaring technical errors

Self-control

- Players must show resistance to provocation
- They have to display self-restraint at difficult moments
- They need to have the ability to react according to how the score develops in the game
- They must have mental resolve

Self confidence

- Players need to feel capable of “moving mountains”
- They must be clear-headed
- They need to be aware of their own value
- They must have high self-esteem

Resistance to stress

- Players have to be able to adapt to circumstances
- They must play at the top of their game in matches where the stakes are high
- They must overcome fears and learn to deal with their emotions

Aggressiveness

- Players must display skill and robustness in duels
- They must have the will to impose themselves physically and to show physical commitment
- They must display a competitive spirit
- They need guts and courage

Risk-taking

- Players need to show imagination, creativity and spontaneity
- They need to have an ability to resolve difficult situations
- They need to dare to attempt things

Psychological endurance

- Players must have the ability to keep repeating their efforts and to show steadfastness in their endeavours
- They need determination, obstinacy and willpower
- They must persevere despite failures
- They must be able to withstand fatigue
- They have to surpass themselves

Competitiveness

- Players need to have the ability to surpass themselves – a fighting spirit
- They must have the will to gain the upper hand over their direct opponent
- They must have the will to win
- They need to have a passion for competition
- They must show a taste for combat

Playing for the team

- Players need to discard any individualist attitudes
- They need to act selflessly
- The team as a whole has to come first
- They must show a sense of co-operation and solidarity
- Communication is essential

Increased motivation, personal accomplishment

- Players need a will to succeed and to make sacrifices
- They must display a passion for the game
- There must be a clear link for the player between his potential and his performances

The desire to progress

- Players have to want to learn
- They have to ask questions of themselves
- They must work on their weaknesses
- They must never be satisfied with what they have achieved
- They must push themselves to the limit of their possibilities

The training of mental attitudes

We can see with young talented players and even with future professionals that one of the shortcomings they often have in their game is with their mental strength. By doing regular and repeated work in training, there is every chance that progress can be made in this area, just as it can in other areas, albeit within limits that still have to be defined. Indeed, certain shortcomings in the area of a player's mental make-up (a lack of aggressiveness, for example) sometimes appear to be innate qualities of the individual, and these can hardly be improved on in the usual coaching set-up. This is when the assistance of a sports psychologist is sought.

During training, depending on the cycle and the type of session, the coach can place special emphasis on mental attitudes. It is possible for him to combine an objective that is centred on mental attitude with other objectives, while still retaining the drills that he usually uses.

- For example:
- a) A 5 v 5 game with 2 extra "floating" players where the emphasis is on losing markers. The coach can stress the mental objective (concentration and communication) of the game and introduce specific instructions to increase the players' level of concentration, their ability to think clearly as well as improving communication between them.
 - b) A 9 v 9 game using two goals with two goalkeepers. Duration: 30 mins. Ten minutes from the end, the "blue" team is leading 3-2. The coach can then work on the "yellow" team's mental attitude (with emphasis on competitiveness, self-control and solidarity). The "red" team plays with 10 against 8 and does its utmost to come back. The "blue" team withstands the stress, deals with the pressure and plays even more as a team to maintain its advantage.
 - c) Intense physical fitness exercises often feature an obvious mental emphasis as well: willpower, aggressiveness, resistance to fatigue and surpassing one's own performance (psychological endurance).

Other areas and objectives that can be combined:

- Technical work can be combined with work on concentration, keeping a clear head and self-confidence.
- Tactical work can be combined with work on wanting to learn, playing for the team and strict adherence to instructions.
- 1 v 1 duels can be combined with work on aggressiveness, developing a taste for combat, and willpower
- Practice games to work on concentration can be combined with work on risk-taking, determination, self-control and creativity.
- etc.

The game or the drill is therefore not the most important thing, but rather the coaching given by the coach who can "smell" the right moment to highlight the "mental" cause as to why an activity has not been successful or why there has been a drop in motivation.

- For example:
- When there is a lack of commitment and fighting spirit in a practice game:
 - He can issue instructions to increase the number of duels and to increase the tempo of the game.
 - He can place greater emphasis on the importance of goals scored.
 - When less attention is being paid:
 - He can increase the degree of difficulty of the task being performed or, alternatively, he can make it easier to heighten the chance of success.
 - He can simply change the drill or activity.

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Techniques for mental training

To ensure that his contributions have maximum effect, the coach may also opt for direct mental training techniques, such as using powerful keywords or choosing more realistic and more concrete objectives. Or he can select other methods such as relaxation, creative visualisation and evaluation of performance, etc.

Use of Keywords

These are words that are highly charged emotionally (using them is more effective than giving a speech).

Examples: IMPACT , DYNAMIC, AGGRESSIVENESS, RISK, COMPOSURE, CONTROL, DISCIPLINE.

Mental imagery

This is the technique of virtual training. The players can derive inspiration from creative visualisation techniques. It is possible to develop the capacity to generate precise images that are both clear and controllable.

- Mental image → The image of a panther for a player who wants to develop his sharpness.
→ The image of a great player performing a piece of technical skill that the coach wants his players to imitate.

Fixing objectives

To be effective, objectives have to be clear, precise, realistic and assessable.

Clarity with objectives helps to ensure the success of all learning and training activities.

- The objectives need to be fixed by the coach but negotiated with the player.

Example: Scoring 15 goals in a season means that you could play 10 games for the first team.

Positive statements

The brain can memorise sensory and motor experiences. Uttering a negative statement merely increases the possibility that the very action which the coach is trying to avoid will occur.

Example: You must not lose this evening → You must win this evening!

Assessment of performances

It is important for a coach to be able to analyse the players' performances so that he can place emphasis on those skills that have been well mastered as well as the situations and incidents that continue to cause problems:

Assessment can take the following forms:

- Evaluation via external feedback (from the coach)
→ Evaluation via internal feedback (self-assessment)

Example: The player can assess his own performance during the last match on video, together with the coach, to assess what lessons need to be learned.

The player's task

This is the role that the coach entrusts to each player to optimise the performance of the whole team:

- The player's task on the pitch, but also away from the pitch.
- The coach has to involve the players and give them a sense of responsibility.

Example: If the whole team performs badly, the coach can appoint the team captain and the team leaders to hold a meeting with the players and allow each of the players to express his views freely.

Techniques for relaxation and energisation

These techniques allow the coach to adjust the level of intensity:

Relaxation – decreases the level of intensity;
– facilitates physical and mental recovery;
– helps to stimulate calmness, visualisation and attention.

Energisation – boosts the level of intensity;
– is extremely useful for training.

Autogenic training, sophrology and yoga are all very well known relaxation methods in top-level sport and are recommended for individual use as well.

Conclusion

The development and improvement of mental attitudes can start as early as the pre-training/development stage with youngsters. By giving the players specific rules and instructions during training sessions, it is possible to stimulate the development of their mental approach. We know that the problem of mental approach is often a personal one, and, for this reason, progress can only be made with specific one-to-one work.

“The art of concentration is essential in everything that we do: It's the HERE AND NOW that counts. THAT HAS TO BE OUR ATTITUDE.”

Yannick Noah

A series of exercises for coaching mental attitudes is included with the content for training sessions at the end of the chapter.

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2. Cognitive skills

Knowing how to read the game, having a good all-round vision, being able to see more quickly and make the right choice of move more rapidly are all signs of a good tactical awareness that sets the great players apart from the rest. This tactical awareness is the result of the players' cognitive skills, of their tactical knowledge and of their ability to read the game.

Definition

Cognitive skills are the instinctive tendencies that allow a motivated and committed player to assess situations through a process of knowledge acquisition (attention/concentration/perception/anticipation). It therefore encompasses everything that the player's intelligence allows him to understand so that he can exploit a given situation or action in the best possible manner. We can say that a player's cognitive skills are the foundation of his tactical behaviour in the same way that co-ordination skills lie at the root of his technique.

"Intelligence is an essential part of the armoury of the modern player, especially if he is going to play in today's tactical set-ups that call for versatility and considerable co-operation with the other players. Speed of thought, attention, concentration and an understanding of the game are the key factors in football."

Fabio Capello

Making use of cognitive skills

The realisation for a player of his own cognitive functioning and knowledge of that functioning are decisive elements for him if he is going to put his cognitive skills to the best possible use. They allow him to plan his action.

a) *Success and understanding*

When a player controls and regulates his cognitive activities, it presupposes that he is able, in some way or another, to be conscious of his cognitive processes. This leads us to the question of how knowledge derives from know-how, since the process starts with the action. Jean Piaget, the great specialist in the field of developmental psychology, makes the following distinction between success and understanding:

"Success is the understanding of a given situation in *action* to a sufficient extent to allow the subject to achieve the proposed goals; understanding is succeeding in dominating the same situations in *thought*."

Jean Piaget

In a child's development, the child (at what Piaget called the "preoperational stage") is able to perform concrete tasks, albeit without mastering an understanding of these tasks. Later on (at the "operational stage"), the child may picture his actions in thoughts; he may describe them in a co-ordinated manner; and he is able to anticipate a short sequence of movements. At the last level (the "formal level"), the child is capable of comparing different processes, of envisaging different causal hypotheses; at this stage, it is no longer the action that gives rise to the understanding of an event, but rather the understanding that drives the action. Actions are therefore directed by a plan. It is only by reaching this level that players can be capable of mastering the tactical aspects of 11-a-side football on a normal-sized pitch. And this is precisely why the tactical learning process is so important with young players.

b) *Metacognition*

Metacognition is the term used to describe the knowledge that the subject has of his own experiences and the control that he exerts over his own cognitive system; it can relate to people (“I have good tactical skills”), to tasks (“it’s difficult for me to do a diving header”), or to strategies (“how can I resolve this problem?”).

In the first phase of this metacognitive experience, the subject has the feeling that something is difficult to perceive, to understand, to remember or to resolve. This means that certain precautions have to be taken when teaching cognitive skills if they are to prove really useful in sporting activity. In particular, they have to be schematised and automated.

Keywords in the cognitive process

• *Perception*

This is the first act of an individual action. It involves the player receiving visual information following an incident in the game. The better his analysis of the situation, the more correct his decision as to how he should react will be.

- With any situation in the match the player has to ask himself two questions as far as his perception is concerned:
 - where do I have to look?
 - what do I have to look at?

This presupposes, of course, that players should always keep their heads up during the game.

• *Anticipation*

“Being able to predict, to anticipate what’s going to happen . . . that’s the analytical part that comes after the player has assimilated the information. This analysis depends on the elements that he has perceived, and it precedes the decision that he will take about the next move. It also assists defenders with their sense of positioning.”

Laurent Blanc, French national team

• *Good all-round vision*

The action of being able to see as much as possible and as far as possible around the pitch.

• *Reading the game*

The action of gathering all possible information contained in the game, understanding that information and acting in the right way.

The ability to master cognitive skills is often the “detail” that makes the difference when tactical choices are made.

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The training of cognitive skills (tactical awareness)

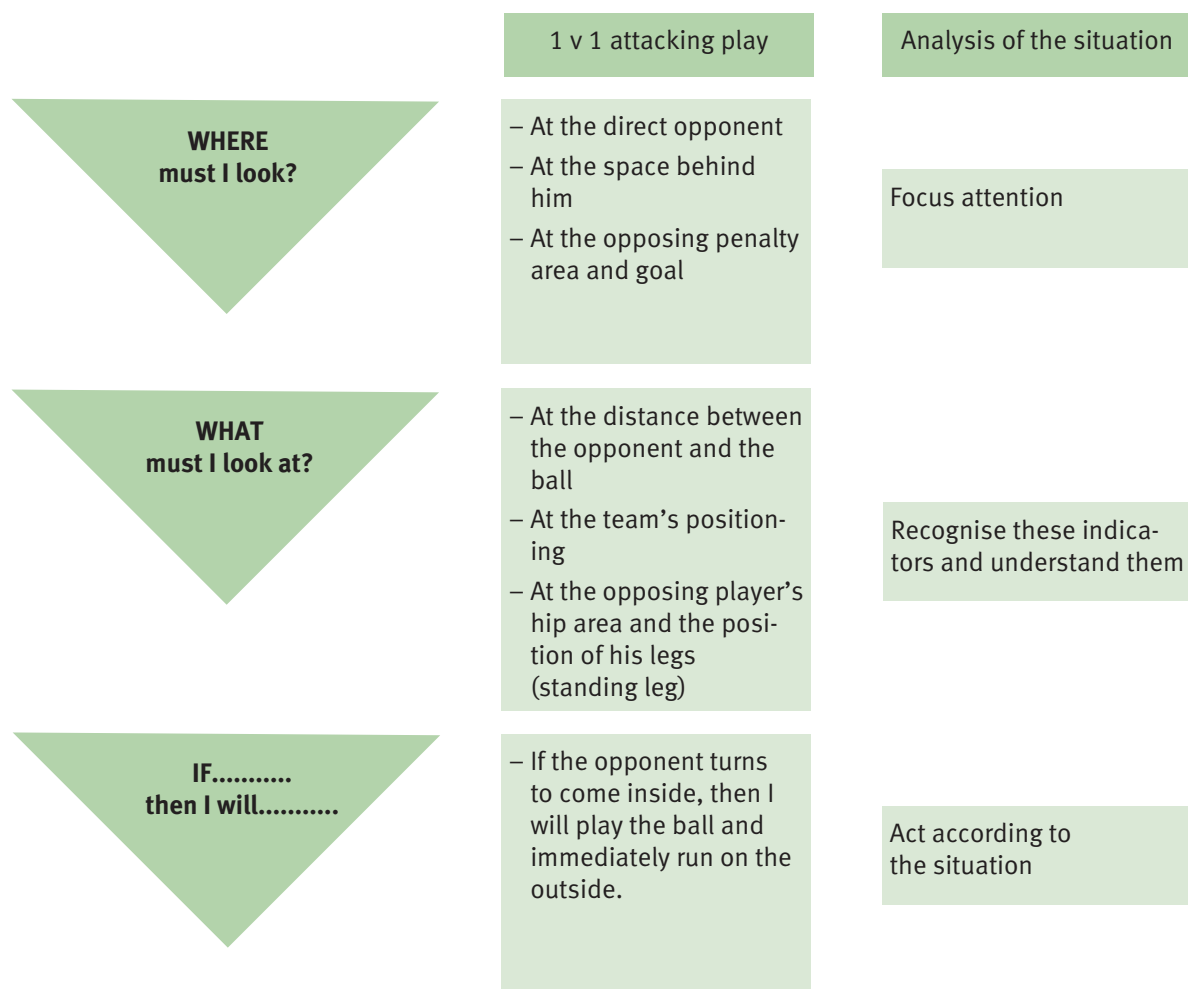
The aim of improving cognitive skills is to ensure that players acquire better tactical ability to enable them to respond quickly and in the correct manner to events that occur in a match. Training is, above all, a way of gaining experience, a way for players to acquire new, more in-depth and real knowledge about the game by working on different match situations that develop their sense of reflection and tactical acumen. Bearing this in mind, the tactical and tactical/technical training situations that are worked on in training sessions must allow the player to realise his cognitive skills. This can be done by expanding the content of the session (by not always doing the same thing). And this is where active coaching is especially important.

Coaches who wish to attach greater importance to cognitive processes in training, especially perception and anticipation, must be fully aware of what occurs in match situations. For this reason, they have to know exactly what needs to be perceived by the players and at what moment, thereby ensuring that what they are seeking to achieve from the players in performance is possible.

For their part, the players have to learn to find their bearings in every single situation that arises in the game and to act accordingly in response to that situation.

With this aim in mind, the game and the situations that arise have to be worked on and analysed.

Example: the strategy of perception



Coaching

It is important that coaches know how to draw players' attention to those elements that will provide the players with the information that they require (the ball, the position of their own team and that of the opponents), and to equip them to be able to interpret the information and act accordingly.

However, it is also necessary for the players to seek this information and to find the solutions for themselves. Personal discovery by the player is often more effective than explanations provided by the coach.

We are therefore talking here about coaching by discovery, by guiding the players in that discovery and by encouraging them to observe matches and observe the attitudes of the great players.

Example: Allow the players to play without interrupting their game.

- Then question them about any problem(s) that they might have encountered.
- Encourage the players to find the solutions by themselves.

- Unrestricted practice games, practice games with specific instructions or themes, guided practice games and work on technical/tactical situations are the practical training formats used to develop cognitive skills.
 - The age, the technical level, the learning level and the experiences of the player are all criteria that need to be taken into account in the training of cognitive skills.
 - These skills can be developed from a very young age, and especially with the games that youngsters play in groups (from those played without a ball, such as "cops and robbers", via basketball, street football, etc., right through to real games of football).
- A player may have a very well developed sense of tactical awareness, but, as a result of certain psychomotor and technical deficiencies, he may be somewhat limited or impeded when attempting to make the right choices.

In the attached training content, we have indicated various practice games and routines to optimise the improvement of cognitive skills and mental attitudes.