

Mental Toughness for Soccer

Daniel Abrahams BSc MSc

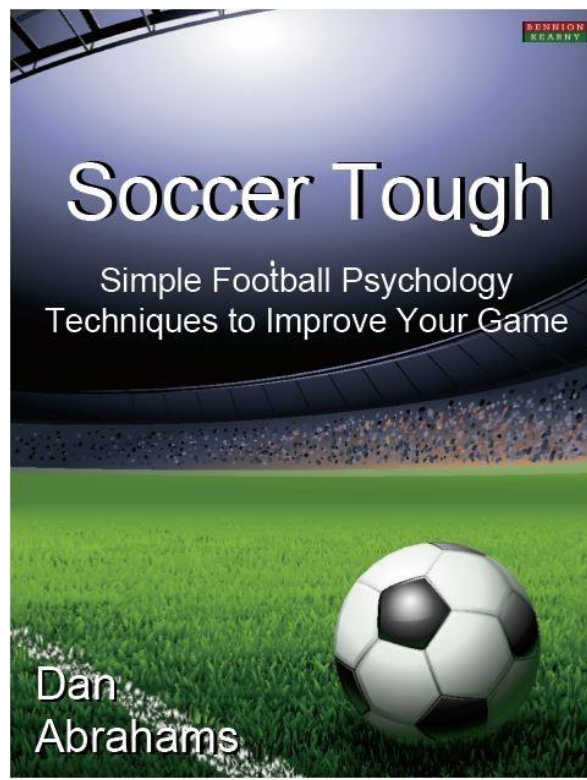
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About The Author

Dan Abrahams is a sport psychologist specialising in the sport of soccer. He is a former professional golfer with a degree in psychology from the University of London (First Class Honours) and a Masters degree in sport psychology from Brunel University, West London. He is HCPC registered meaning he is legally safe to practice as a psychologist. Dan has worked with players, coaches and managers from some of the leading clubs in the world, and he travels the globe delivering his simple and powerful techniques and philosophies to leading clubs, organisations, individual footballers and competitors from other sports.

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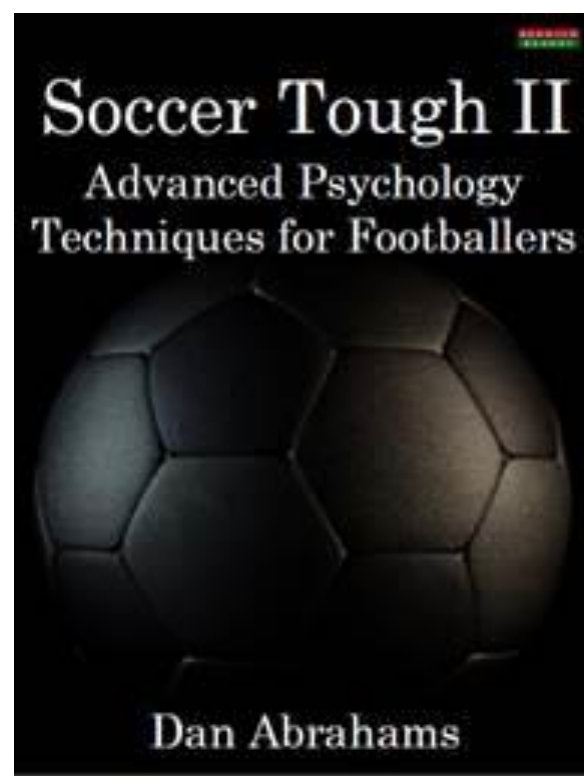
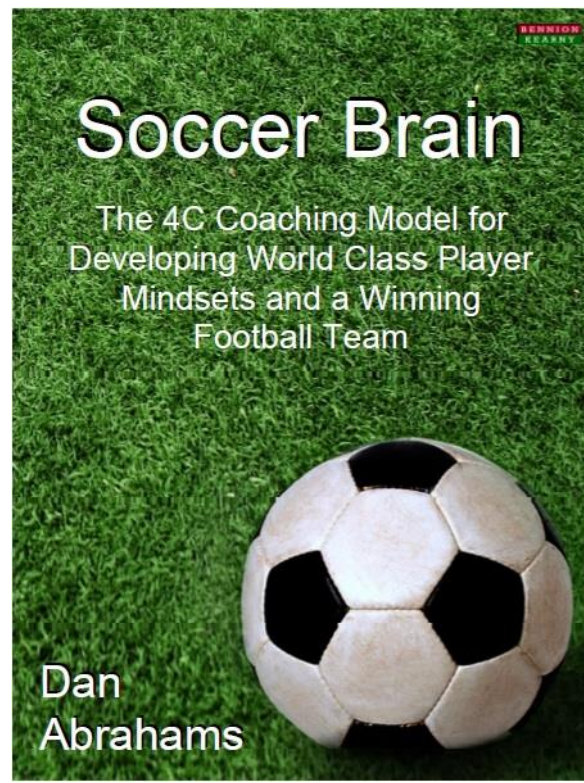


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Please Note

Permission has been sought and granted by soccer players mentioned and used as examples in this e book.

Introduction

I'd like you to use your imagination. Take the role of a central defender and picture this:

Your coach shouts out to your team "Come on lads, forget it and get back into this." But you can't help feel downbeat. Big cup game; you've gone a goal down; just ten minutes to go. You've dominated possession but as so often happens in football you're now losing. You feel the confidence drain out of you. A misplaced pass that led to the goal hasn't helped. As your team mates re-start the game your thoughts switch to the mistake you've just made. Suddenly this image of the poor pass flashes in front of you accompanied by the thought "I've messed it up for everyone, we're gonna lose now."

Your mind is racing, thinking of everything but the game. You've worked so hard to get into the cup final, your first for many years, and now one simple mistake and you've blown it. You look over to the coaches on the touchline. They can see what you feel: noticeably slower, less agile, less willing to run. Focus and confidence destroyed...individual performance shattered.

Football can beat you up, it really can!

One match everything goes great. You drill passes into your team mates, you time every tackle perfectly, you are sharp and on your toes and seem to have the movement to find space to receive passes for the whole game. Controlling the ball is effortless. If you are a striker you get plenty of shots away and if you're a defender you always seem one step ahead of the opposition.

But another match might bring a different story. The game is a chore. Your legs feel heavy; your feet feel like they're sticking to the ground with glue. You are slow to react, you miss your passes and the opposition brush off your attempts to tackle them. On this day the striker can't get a shot on goal and the defender makes mistake after mistake allowing the opposition to nip in and bag a couple of goals.

Welcome to my world; my world as a football psychologist. In my world how you talk to yourself on the pitch is just as important as your ability to trap and control the ball. In my world your body language is as vital a component of performance as the ability to head a crossed ball. In my world being thoroughly prepared for a match is more than just what you should eat and remembering to bring your boots to the big match.

I am a football psychologist. I work with teams and individuals to help them develop mindsets that win more matches, and I want to introduce you to some of my football psychology techniques to help you play better, more consistent football.

Why is Football Psychology Important?

The best of the best work on their football psychology because they know this simple fact about football: **The difference between success and failure is measured in inches.**

The difference between success and failure is measured in inches

When I watch football I'm constantly in awe of the small differences that affect the result. A mistimed tackle, a poorly delivered pass, a weak shot, an over-hit cross, and a poorly timed run are a few things that factor together to win or lose games. An observant football fan will see this week in, week out in park and amateur football right the way through to games played in the English Premiership, La Liga and Serie A.

There isn't a game that goes by where this isn't the case, but allow me to illustrate this by using two football examples. The first takes us back to 1996 and the semi finals of the European Championships. England, the hosts of the tournament were playing Germany. At one-all in extra time the game was tight. This was a tournament when FIFA, the governing body of world soccer, decided to play a format called Golden Goal in extra time, meaning that the first team to score instantly won the tie.

Anyway, deep into extra time England had a glorious opportunity to score. The enigmatic and enormously talented English player Paul Gascoigne agonisingly found himself an inch away from latching onto a ball played across the front of the goal. Gascoigne had run from deep into a great position inside the German penalty area, and, as he noticed his team mate lining up to drill the ball across the penalty area he took a couple of strides closer to the goal. The 80,000 English supporters held their breath as they saw what Gascoigne saw, the opportunity to become a national hero. But Gascoigne hesitated for a split second, and whilst he stretched his leg as far as he could he missed contact by an inch. 30 minutes later England were out of the competition losing in a nail biting penalty shoot out.

Now fast forward to 2008 and the Champions League Final between Manchester United and Chelsea. The game had gone to penalties. Up stepped John Terry who, if he scored would have won the final for Chelsea. He took his run up, slipped and hit the post. Another missed penalty later and Chelsea had lost, beaten in the most agonising of circumstances to English rivals Manchester United. Both of these incidents can be checked out on You Tube.

These are just a couple of examples but the fact is football is a game of inches. In every game, every single day the world over, from World cup matches to college games to fun 5 aside matches football is a game of inches. Matches are won and lost on the odd misplaced pass and mistimed tackle. Football is a game of inches and therefore it is vital that every footballer is equipped with simple football psychology strategies to deal with this.

What about your game?

Take a few minutes to think about the games you've won and lost by the odd goal. A loss may have been down to you because you'd lost a little focus against a quick witted striker who managed to get in front of you to score the only goal of the game. A win may have been a result of your team mate playing with confidence and jumping an inch higher than the centre back to glance a header into the corner of the net. When you think about it the game is won and lost on those inches.

There is another reason why the best work on their football psychology.

Most Competitors Want to Win

I'm going to roll out the 'if I had a pound' cliché now, but if I had a pound for every soccer player who has told me about how passionate they are about winning that would be great. And of course it's vital that anyone competing at any level has a will to win. But they often overlook a vital fact about winning. A fact that the hugely successful American college basketball coach Bobby Knight once insightfully remarked about:

"It's not the will to win that is important. It's the will to prepare to win"

Whether you play a five aside every Monday, whether you are a ten year old playing for your school team or whether you are playing for Brazil in the world cup final the likelihood is that everyone who is playing against you wants to win as well. It's safe to say that everyone wants to win. But the reality is it's the person and team who are the most prepared who gives himself or themselves the best opportunity to win.

And this gets to the heart of football psychology. Working on your mindset gives you that edge over your opponents. Having simple techniques to play with unshakeable belief and correct focus as well as being able to bounce back with confidence from a defeat will have more influence over the result of your next match than the person or team who prepares less but has an extreme desire to win.

I now want to offer you one more reason as to why it's vital for everyone to work on their football psychology. It's do with the way our brains are designed.

Brain Fact

Your brain works in milliseconds

Yes, whilst the game of football works in seconds, the brain works in milliseconds.

What scientists have found is that the brain makes sure people feel emotions in 10-20 milliseconds and think consciously 500 milliseconds later.

It's mind blowing stuff. And it means a footballer has to be fantastic at dealing with his emotions and managing his thought processes every single second of every single match.

A footballer has to be fantastic at dealing with his emotions and managing his thought processes every single second of every single match

A feeling or thought that rises to the surface happens in a blink of an eye. And these feelings and thoughts affect your performance. They affect your technique, your anticipation, your awareness and decision making. They affect your all round game. Football is a game of psychology and you must improve your mindset to become the best footballer you can be.

What's in this Book?

Very simply, some of the football psychology techniques I use to help my clients reach their potential.

Inside this e book are some of the secrets that helped:

- Carlton Cole go from forgotten reserve team player at West Ham to England International in just 18 months.

- Anthony Stokes score 18 goals in 5 months having scored just 4 in a year and a half, and then win a dream million pound move to his boyhood team, Celtic FC.
- Junior Stanislas break into the first team at West Ham after the manager had labelled him too inconsistent to play first team Premiership soccer.
- Richard Keogh to become Player of the Year at Coventry City FC in only his first season in the English Championship division.

My simple football psychology techniques have helped me win a contract at an English Premiership club, work with the English FA and capture the interest and imagination of dozens of professional players, coaches and governing bodies.

The techniques are built from the very best in sport and performance psychology practice as well as from the experiences of world class athletes including Lionel Messi, Muhammad Ali and Tiger Woods.

I'm not saying all this to impress you. I'm saying this to **impress upon** you that the information in this e book works.

The football psychology techniques I'm going to introduce to you are simple. I only do simple football psychology techniques. But they aren't necessarily easy.

There is a difference between simple and easy

The techniques are simple to understand but they are going to take a little effort to apply and will power to get right.

But put a little effort and will power into this process and you're going to improve without even breaking sweat.

How good is that? In a sport that requires enormous amounts of physical fitness you can improve without even moving from your armchair.

This football psychology e book is designed for everyone from the recreational player to the Premiership stars, from the grass roots coach to the Champions League manager. If you play football on the weekend just for fun then this book will help you get better at the game you love without breaking sweat. If you play for a living then you will glean simple ideas from every chapter that will help you play at the highest level with greater confidence and increased focus. If you're a youngster that wants to tread the hallowed turf of the world's best stadiums then read on, for in this book lie the secrets to making the most of your talent. If you're a local coach then read this from front to back and use all the football psychology strategies to help your players play better, more consistent football. Maybe you're a football parent and you want a few techniques to help your child

play better under pressure. Or you might be a supporter who wants to get inside the minds of the players from your favourite team. This e book literally is for everyone in and around the beautiful game.

So let's get started...

Chapter 1

Confidence & Your Football Brain

Confidence is elusive

One match you play with confidence and the next you don't. Do you suffer from this problem, just as countless millions of footballers around the world do?

And it's not as if the leading professionals on the planet don't fall into this category. From David Beckham to Lionel Messi to Pele to Bobby Charlton to Maradona to the players playing in the English Premiership, La Liga and Serie A right now to the players who won the first ever world cup for Uruguay in the 1930's, every professional player has had the enormous challenge of trying to maintain confidence. Some have overcome terrible slumps in confidence and form while others have fallen foul of the confidence disease and finished their careers prematurely.

And a lack of confidence can prevent a promising career from even starting. Across every continent some of the game's brightest young talent fail to make the grade because their confidence is fragile, skin deep and built on quick sand. They can trap a ball superbly, dribble past defenders as if they're not there, and shoot from the tightest of angle and score, and yet when they are given their chance to play for the first team in the professional leagues their silky skills vanish, their awareness is non-existent, their anticipation and decision making slows... career over before it's started. Their football psychology simply isn't good enough.

You know confidence might just be the most important skill you have as a footballer.

Confidence might just be the most important skill you have as a footballer.

Let me repeat that because it's so important for you as a footballer to understand:

Confidence might just be the most important skill you have as a footballer.

I've written the word skill on purpose. Skills can be developed. Your confidence isn't fixed. It can be improved.

Confidence isn't fixed, it can be improved

That's exciting to know isn't it? With a little effort, with a little will power, with some knowledge of football psychology you can take control of your confidence. You can step foot on the pitch and deliver a performance that is full of confidence...perhaps not every time but certainly most of the time.

The Enemies of Confidence

If you play football on a weekend for your local team or with mates after work in a 5 a side league I'm sure you do so for fun and for fitness. But I'm also sure you want to win. I'm sure there is a competitive edge to your matches. And where there is competitiveness there can be worry, uncertainty, fear, doubt and anxiety. These are the enemies of confidence.

The enemies of confidence include:

- ***Worry***
- ***Uncertainty***
- ***Fear***
- ***Doubt***
- ***Anxiety***

They strike at the heart of consistency. They slow you down both physically and mentally. They ruin your decision making and co-ordination. They prevent you from being the best individual footballer you can be and the best team mate you can be.

Confidence: What is it?

Quite simply confidence is certainty and freedom.

A footballer who is confident believes he will play well. He believes deep down that he will execute his skills with commitment and play to the very best of his ability. And when he plays he plays with complete freedom, with trust, without fear of mistake, playing to win and not to lose.

A confident footballer plays to win and not to lose

Take a couple of minutes to picture this confident footballer. Put yourself in his or her boots. Picture playing with complete freedom, playing without doubt, worry or anxiety.

Is this you?

Occasionally maybe, but **EVERY** time?

If it's not you at all or not you enough of the time then you should be very excited about reading this football psychology book. You are going to improve your football massively.

Your Football Brain

Your brain is where it's at on the football pitch. This is the part of you that controls the ball, passes, tackles and shoots. It's the part that anticipates, makes decisions, scans the pitch for team mates and the opposition, reads the game, focuses, manages emotions and remembers the good times and the bad.

Hey it's pretty important! In fact it's safe to say that your football brain *is* your football game.

Your football brain is your football game

And it is due to a single quirk of the brain that confidence tends to be inconsistent and elusive.

The reason why confidence tends to be inconsistent and at times elusive is due to the way your brain is designed

Brain Fact

The brain is hardwired to be negative

Let's say that again because it's important to know:

The brain is hardwired to be negative

In other words, it is all too easy for the brain to concentrate on worries and fears and for gloomy thoughts to dominate. And this happens both on and off the pitch.

Now let's be clear. I'm not saying that everyone is walking around all doom and gloom. And I'm certainly not saying that everyone is the same. Some of us are more optimistic and positive than others (and of course slices of realism are crucial for us to be able to function effectively in life.) But what many psychologists believe today is that the brain defaults into the negative and that by and large we're hardwired to register and remember negative events more quickly and deeply than positive ones.

We're hardwired to register and remember negative events more quickly and deeply than positive ones

Let's think about this in our everyday life for a few minutes.

Some people who have been bitten by a dog subsequently develop a fear of dogs. But in all likelihood they will have had hundreds of positive experiences with dogs previously. The one bad experience negates the hundreds of good ones. Here's another example. Sometimes we let a bad experience overshadow what essentially was a good experience. Perhaps you've been to a social event where one person was incredibly rude to you. This episode may have trumped the great conversations you'd had with other guests and left you feeling hurt and angry and pushed the positives of the event to the back of your mind.

When you think about a working day, or when you think back over your life, what experiences capture your attention – your successes and pleasant times, or the failures, hurts and disappointments?

Yes, our brains like to prioritise negative pieces of information rather than positive. We pay much more attention to criticism than praise. It is why research shows that people suffer more negative emotion if they lose £100 than experience positive emotion if they win £100. It is also why bad news can easily undermine a good mood whereas good news doesn't always have the ability to get rid of a bad mood.

The reason we're like this is to do with survival. For humans to survive as a species our brains evolved to anticipate and overcome dangers, protect us from pain, and solve problems: so dangers, pain, and problems are what is most attractive to the brain. A leading neuropsychologist Rick Hanson (www.rickhanson.net) calls this the "brain's negativity bias." He says that the human nervous system "scans for, reacts to, stores, and recalls negative information about oneself and one's world. The brain is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones."

I love that:

The brain is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones.

So what happens on the pitch? The brain is attracted to all the problems the game confronts us with. The fact the defender is a man mountain beast and he keeps barging you off the ball. The fact the opposition are top of the league and they play at a high tempo. The fact the bottom team are so motivated to beat you that they keep pressing you and you keep losing the ball. The fact that you've just missed a great chance and you now can't get it out of your head and you can't stop thinking that you're going to be dropped. The fact you think you look stupid after you just played that misdirected pass.

Result? Loss of confidence in the moment...individual performance shattered!

And what happens off the pitch? You remember the bad games, the games you lost, the mistakes you made, the poor training sessions you've had, the criticism from the manager and coaches, and the verbal bashings you've had from team mates. You spend time thinking about how you're going to lose the next match or lose your place in the team.

Result? Loss of confidence, a lack of self belief and little chance of performing to the best of your ability on match day

Yes, the reality is that the brain is brilliant at honing in on what is wrong with our game and fantastic at making us worry about how we are going to play in our next match. The brain is a master at making us brood over our football when it's going badly. It is great at making us dwell on our mistakes. The brain is top notch at helping us focus on what is unfair during a match when things are going wrong and we are losing.

And it is this negativity that ultimately leads to both losses of confidence and an inconsistency of confidence.

This negativity can be consistent. It can eat away at your ability as a footballer. It will slow you down on the pitch. It will damage your co-ordination, your awareness, your anticipation and your decision making. You'll make simple look complicated. Off the pitch it will strip away your self-belief and subsequently damage your motivation and focus.

So to be clear about this:

Both on and off the pitch the brain likes to focus on the negative

This is particularly true when you are playing under pressure. It likes to dwell on mistakes or think about the penalties of making a mistake.

And remember this brain fact from my introduction: whilst football works in seconds, the brain works in milliseconds

The brain works in milliseconds

This means that a negative thought can pop into your head very, very quickly and it can have catastrophic effects on your confidence and ultimately on your performance.

This isn't you

Now you may be reading this and thinking “this isn’t me, I always think I can do well. I’m a pretty positive person.” And you might be right. Your football psychology may be rock solid. You may be someone who is able to reflect positively and who is able to summon up confidence for the match ahead.

But I urge you to be as self-critical about your confidence as possible. I urge you to look deep inside yourself and honestly question how you think and feel after a training session and how you think and feel leading up to a match. What really is the state of your confidence and your football psychology?

The next couple of chapters of this football psychology book have been written to address the fact that the brain is hardwired to be negative. It will give you both on pitch and off pitch techniques that are simple to understand. They will take a bit of will power and effort, but when used on a consistent basis they will have an enormously positive effect on your game.

It’s important to remember this:

Your football brain is your football game

So let’s get working on that football brain.

Chapter 2

Building Self Belief

It is impossible to be confident on match day if you have no self-belief.

It **is** possible to be confident on match day ***some of the time*** if you have ***some*** self-belief.

But if you **ooze** self-belief; if self-belief is flowing around your body and through every pore then you have a great chance of being confident far more often than not. And high self-belief delivers bullet proof confidence. Have a bad game and you won't be as susceptible to a drop in confidence and a subsequent slump in form.

A big part of my job as a football psychologist is to help my clients build self-belief. All the best athletes on the planet have this quality. It astounds me that a footballer wouldn't have a few simple football psychology techniques to help him build and maintain this most vital of human qualities.

Self-belief is to confidence what foundations are to a house or an engine is to a car. My job is to give you football psychology techniques to build a strong foundation, or if we're comparing to a car, then a top class engine. In fact, let's pimp this engine; let's soup up your car by increasing the power of its engine.

Self-belief: It Starts with your Self-Image

Your self-image rules your football game.

Your self-image rules your football game

What is your self-image?

Your self-image is how you see yourself. Simple!

You don't have one self-image, you have lots. This is because you play many roles in life. You have a self-image about you as a husband, a wife, a father, a brother or sister, and a worker. You have a self-image about everything.

For example, what is the self-image you have about yourself and:

- Mathematics
- Writing
- Talking in front of large groups
- Driving

Perhaps you **see** yourself as being rubbish at maths and numbers, but a competent writer. Perhaps you see yourself as a confident presenter but as someone who can be a little shy down the pub.

And of course you have a self-image of you as a footballer. This is your football image

Have a think about that for a few seconds. You have a self-image of you as a footballer, a football image. In fact, start thinking about your football image (a central part of football psychology.)

And guess what. Not only will you have a football image you will also have lots of mini football images.

For example, if you're a striker you might have football images relating to:

- Your ability to move
- Your ability to score
- Your ability to hold the ball up or make the ball stick
- Your ability to find space
- Your ability to hit the target or strike the ball cleanly
- Your ability to win headers
- Your ability to play under pressure
- Your ability to focus

As a football psychologist these are just a few of the mini football images I explore with footballers. So remember, as a footballer you will have a whole range of football images.

And as a footballer your goal is simple: to build and maintain positive football images related to your game

And as a coach your goal is simple: to help your players build and maintain positive football images related to their game

You are Not Born with it

Interestingly, you are not born with your self-images. You develop them yourself. You develop them in 4 ways:

- By judging your own experiences (perception)
- By remembering your experiences (memory)
- By your thinking
- By your imagination

So maybe as a footballer you keep remembering the chance you missed to score last week (memory.) And that makes you assume that others think you're no good as a striker (perception.) And you reinforce this by thinking you're no good as a striker (thinking.) And you then spend time imagining missing in the next game (imagination)...this is football psychology in action folks!

Do this every single day and you are feeding a negative football image of you as a striker. Your striker image!

And are you going to be able to be confident on match day if you keep feeding these negative images to yourself? Are you going to be able to perform under pressure? Are you going to have great football psychology?

It's not going to happen. You are going to be lacking in confidence. You are going to be slow to the ball rather than first to the ball. You are going to lack effective decision making. You are going to be unaware of the movement of your team mates and the opposition around you.

I'm sorry, but if you become a slave to this kind of thinking then you are going to let your team mates down.

You are going to let your team mates down

Case Study: The Rise and Fall of Tiger's Self-Image

Football psychology can learn from Tiger Woods. To me, Tiger Woods is an example of someone who had an extraordinarily strong self image for his sport (his golf image) and it took some extraordinary life events to change and damage his golf image. Tiger is, to me, an example of a walking psychological phenomenon. The training he received from his father growing up is awe inspiring. At the age of 6 Tiger fell asleep to the sound of simple positive messages. He heard a voice from under his pillow, where his father placed a tape every night with messages such as "You will move mountains," and "you will be the best." Did this make a huge difference to his career? Who knows! But it set him on a journey that for over a decade helped him become one of the most mentally tough sportsmen ever to grace the planet.

At the age of twelve Tiger started to have regular visits to a clinical sport psychologist called Dr. Jay Brunza who helped him hone his visualisation and imagination. And finally throughout his teenage years Tiger was exposed to a concentration technique that helped build his phenomenal focus. Earl Woods played with Tiger virtually every day and from the age of 13 Earl would regularly

do small things that might put Tiger off. He would cough when he got to the top of his backswing or rattle his clubs when Tiger drew his putter back. As Earl Woods recalled later before his death it would frustrate Tiger immensely but he knew it was an important exercise to help hone his focus ability before he entered the melee of professional golf.

And so Tiger listened and learned and grew a strong golf image, perhaps stronger than there's ever been in professional golf. He saw himself competing with and beating the best and when he got to the course I would take an educated guess that his mindset was "I'm Tiger, I'm here and I'm going to win. This is my course, this is my tournament and no one is going to beat me." And win he did, until the events of December 2009 unfolded.

People can quibble that the current demise (at the time of writing this) of Tiger Woods is down to his poor physical shape or the swing changes he's making. But for me the accusations and subsequent acceptance of marital misdemeanours has changed Tiger's self image and specifically his golf image which have damaged his performances on the course. He may launch a come-back, you can't rule him out. But he will never be the same Tiger Woods again. The same dominant, even mystical figure, ever again.

Keeping a Positive Football Image

A football image is like a bank account. The more money you put into a bank account the more interest you get. The more positive your thoughts the better your football image, the more confident you will be and the better you will play. Spend more than you make, then your bank account goes into the red and you will be charged by the bank. Think more negative thoughts than positive thoughts and you will have a poor football image; you will lose confidence and play worse.

You have to have more positive thoughts to feed your football image than negative thoughts to be the best you can be

You **cannot** afford to compromise. You **must** keep a positive football image. And you must keep a positive image of all the game components that make up your football image....helping you have strong football psychology foundations.

Lionel Messi's REAL Talent

As I write the best footballer in the world is Lionel Messi. He really is outstanding.

People see Lionel Messi play and watch his silky skills, his ability to go on long mazy runs, his incredible eye for goal.

And it's fair to say that he has enormous technical ability. No one can dispute that. But there's a famous advert that you can view on You Tube that highlights a talent Messi has that might be the talent that has more impact on his game than his physical skills...his football psychology. This is what Messi says on this advert:

"When I was 11 I had a growth hormone problem. But being smaller I was more agile. And I learnt to play with the ball on the ground because that's where it felt more comfortable. Now I realise sometimes bad things can turn out good."

Messi said this on the iconic Adidas 'Impossible is Nothing' adverts and it gives us a great insight into his mindset.

There is no doubting his physical talent. He took to the pitch and was better than most in his age group as he developed at the Barcelona Academy. However, would he have been the footballer he is today without strong football psychology? Probably not! And the way he saw his battle against his growth hormone problem highlights an important quality that all champions have when it comes to dealing with tough times and tough challenges.

Champions find the positives in everything they do

It's a simple statement but very difficult to be able to achieve. Champions are brilliant at being able to see the solution in a problem. They are able to draw positives from a negative event.

Let's break this down. Can you draw positives from:

- A defeat
- A personally poor game
- Criticism from a coach, manager or team mate
- A poor training session
- An injury

The fact is Lionel Messi's biggest talent was to turn something that was a negative into something that worked for him and helped him become the best player in the world.

Lionel's Messi's biggest talent was this:

Confident thinking

Let's think back to the areas that impact our self image:

- Perception
- Memory
- Thinking
- Imagination

Lionel Messi is brilliant at perceiving things in a positive way and then thinking confidently about the situation.

Messi refused to let his physical size handicap him. In fact he used it to his advantage. "I am more agile" he said. "I can learn to play with the ball on the ground better than everyone else" he said.

Can you start seeing everything in a positive light? Can you start seeing every situation as a challenge rather than a problem?

Can you start seeing everything in a positive light? Can you start seeing every situation as a challenge rather than a problem?

Think about some of the problems you face. Can you see these situations as challenges? Can you see them in a positive light?

I will give you some specific techniques to build your football image in part 2 of this chapter but right now let's have a look at the making of another very accomplished modern player.

The Gary Neville Effect

The Lionel Messi story isn't dissimilar to Gary Neville's experience.

Neville grew up playing at the Manchester United Academy amongst some of the best modern day players in England. He played alongside David Beckham, Paul Scholes and Ryan Giggs.

It's fair to say he looked around and saw some seriously good talent. As a footballer of average physical gifts he could choose to either dwell on this as a negative or look on it as a positive situation. He chose the latter.

He chose to think about how lucky he was to be able to compete against some of the best young players on the planet. He chose to think about how good he could become if he worked harder than them. He chose to imagine the exciting future he would have if he used them to learn all he could about his role as a right back.

He chose to look at the situation in a positive light and it paid off. He didn't moan and groan; he didn't give up. He grew a strong football image because he used the challenging situation he had to drive him to be all he could be. And where did that get him? Playing for England...that's where!

So how do we build our ***confident thinking?***

I'm going to give you four seriously powerful football psychology techniques. These techniques are linked together, are related and can be used separately or combined.

By using these football psychology techniques you can become a great thinker of your football.

You may think and feel that you're a positive thinker and that you have a strong football image. Maybe you do. Maybe this section of the book is less important to you than the other sections.

But stop and think for a few minutes. I reckon everyone can afford to think a little better every day, even positive thinkers. I think that you can afford to improve your football psychology by spending time becoming more aware of your thoughts, because if you can become an even more effective thinker, and if you can build an even stronger football image, then you will be the best footballer you can be. Hey, you may even surprise yourself. You may discover you're not quite as positive as you can be. You may discover a few new, simple football psychology techniques to improve your game.

If you can become an even more effective thinker, and if you can build an even stronger football image, then you will be the best footballer you can be

So let me ask the questions. When you think about your football what do you tend to think about? When you think about your last match what is held in your mind? Do you think about your best moments or do you think about your mistakes? Do you think about the chances you made or the chances you missed? Do you think about the passes you completed or the passes you gave away? Do you think about the tackles you won or the tackles where your opponent out muscled you?

I ask these questions because I have quite a few people say to me “but I think about the bad stuff because I need to be realistic.”

The problem with this attitude is that you will constantly bombard your football image with the bad stuff. By being ‘realistic’ and remembering the mistakes you made and the poor parts of your performance you have no chance of building your confidence. Of course there is a time to examine what needs to be worked on in your game and football psychology technique four deals with getting the right balance between thinking about your strengths and your weaknesses. But right now let’s get on and teach you football psychology technique one.

Football Psychology Technique 1: Stop Listening to Yourself, Start *Talking to Yourself*

I can’t remember where I first heard the statement ‘stop listening to yourself, start talking to yourself’ but it’s true. Boy is it true.

As we discussed in the previous chapter, because of our brain we tend to have a lot of thoughts that pop into our head that are negative. And we tend to ***listen to them***.

“There is no way we’re gonna beat this team, they’re top of the league.”

“I don’t fancy my chances of scoring today against those massive centre backs”

“I had a nightmare last week. I don’t feel confident at all”

We tend to listen to them; we tend to let them dominate our feelings and behaviours.

We tend to let our negative thoughts dominate our feelings and behaviours

Champions are champions because they choose to ignore this rubbish the brain comes up with. In fact they drown out their negative self-talk. They stop listening to themselves and constantly ***talk to themselves***.

Champions drown out the negatives and constantly talk to themselves

And as a football psychologist this is what I teach: to think like a champion. Champions take control of *what* they are thinking. To start building a strong, unshakeably positive football image you have to start taking control of your thoughts, you have to think confidently.

You have to start taking control of your thoughts, you have to think confidently

Case Study: Learning from Muhammad Ali

No one talked to themselves better than the great Muhammad Ali (he would have had great football psychology.) Here are a couple of his quotes:

"I am the greatest; I said that even before I knew I was"

"I hated every minute of training, but I said, "Don't quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion."

"It's lack of faith that makes people afraid of meeting challenges, and I believed in myself."

"It's the repetition of affirmations that leads to belief. And once that belief becomes a deep conviction, things begin to happen."

It's the repetition of affirmations that leads to belief

Wow! Great words! This is a guy who has become an iconic figure in sport. He is many people's greatest sportsman of all time. And he's telling you here..."I talk to myself confidently time and again...time and again"

Was he scared going into the ring against Sonny Liston and George Foreman? Of course he was. But he refused to listen to that inner voice of doubt. He refused to listen to his negative inner voice.

Muhammad Ali refused to listen to that inner voice of doubt. He refused to listen to his negative inner voice.

And those who want a strong football psychology should take note. Ali understood that the more he talked to himself in a confident, upbeat, and energised manner the better he'd feel about himself, the more confident he'd be and the better he'd perform.

And this is what I make sure my football psychology clients are doing. I want them to be immersed in the process of talking to themselves confidently. I want them ignoring the negative inner voice, accepting it will come in, but brushing it aside with upbeat, confident talk.

"This Saturday is my Saturday. It will be my game. I will own the pitch. I will own the opposition. I will play harder than I ever have."

This is just one example of how I want a player talking to himself going into a game.

"I'm going to be strong and dominant. I'm going to dominate the opposition. I will be quick and on my toes no matter what happens"

And when you speak to yourself like this you give yourself a great chance of being confident and playing to the best of your ability. This is great football psychology.

Why?

Because the words you use determine the pictures you see which drives your confidence and subsequently determines your performance.

I'm going to say that again because I want it to impact you. I want this sentence to be a guiding force in your life:

The words you use determine the pictures you see which drives your confidence and subsequently determines your performance

Please read it again. Think about it. And then do it.

Start talking to yourself. Start using great words. Start using powerful words. Stop listening to yourself, start talking to yourself. Build a strong football psychology step by step by using exciting, powerful words.

This leads me to technique two

Football Psychology Technique 2: Your Dream Game

This is a fantastic football psychology technique and one that is at the heart of my Play Better Football CD.

How would you describe your dream game? What words would you use? What are you like in the air? What are you like in the tackle? What is your movement like?

Take a few minutes to picture your answers.

I bet you ***feel*** quite good after answering those questions. Remember words create pictures. If you picture these things you'll start to ***feel*** pretty good. Maybe you feel like you want to go play right now? Maybe your football psychology has rocketed after answering these simple questions?

Keep going:

In your dream game what runs are you making? Are you powerful in the challenge? Are you strong in the tackle? What does it look and feel like?

Again take a few minutes to think about your answers.

What words would you use that sum up your dream game. Here is what some of my clients have said:

- Strong
- Dominant
- Competitive
- Belief
- Focused
- Winner
- Aggressive

What words would you choose? What words would you use to describe your dream game?

Keep picturing:

Are you first to the ball? Are you loud? How vocal are you? What are you saying to others? Are you being a leader?

Are you playing with belief? What does it look like when you play with belief?

What does it look like when you play with complete unshakeable belief? What does it feel like?

Keep picturing. Use all your senses. See and feel yourself play your dream game. See and feel the pace. See and feel yourself checking your shoulders, taking in the information around you and acting on that information.

What words sum it up? Make these words emotional words, motivating words. Don't make them boring. Let them raise the hairs on the back of your neck when you think about them.

Create a stadium in your mind. Blow it up; make it big, bold and bright.

Make your pictures big, bold and bright

When you think about your dream game you are giving yourself small injections of confidence. Do it enough times and you will feel big hits of belief.

When you think about your dream game you are giving yourself small injections of confidence. Do it enough times and you will feel big hits of belief

Now I want you to think about your dream game for 10 minutes every single day.

Think about your dream game every single day

I want you feeding your brain with these words every day. It's like brain nourishment.

And this is something you can do a couple of hours before a match that can help build your confidence in the moment. My Play Better Football CD helps you to do this and is an ideal companion to your match preparation routine.

Football Psychology Technique 3: Picture Success

I'm going to hand you over now to one of the best strikers in the English Premier league...Didier Drogba. He is a great competitor. He has a very positive football psychology.

This is what he says about his preparation:

"I think about what I'm going to do to escape my marker. I close my eyes and try to imagine it. I actually think about the way I am going to score my goal. Most of the time when you get it in your head that you are going to score a certain kind of goal, it happens."

Drogba is strong, powerful and skilful. He moves well, more often than not works very hard and has an exceptional eye for goal. But what Drogba instinctively knows is that if he is to prepare thoroughly and effectively for every match, if he wants to feel confident he has to spend time every day picturing how he wants to play.

Like all top athletes Drogba pictures success every single day.

And this is what I want you to start doing. Why? Because the brain cannot tell the difference between what is real and what is imagined.

The brain cannot tell the difference between what is real and what is imagined

Yes, this is an amazing fact about the brain. Academic sport psychologists and neuroscientists have demonstrated that when you imagine playing football the brain actually thinks you are playing.

When you imagine playing football the brain actually thinks you are playing

So sit back on your sofa and start picturing how you want to play in your next match. You don't have to see the pictures like you'd watch a movie in front of you. Lots of people find it very difficult to 'see' pictures in their mind vividly. If you're one of those people then don't worry, don't panic. Just try to get some

kind of image. Try to get some 'sensation' of playing. This is enough. This is enough to trick the brain that you are actually playing.

And if you do this you'll be in good company.

Pele: The Ultimate Picture Maker

In fact very good company! One of the greatest players of all time no less.

Yes Pele used to actively use football psychology and take time to picture success before every game. Below is a quote from Gary Mack's excellent sport psychology book 'The Mental Gym.'

'Pele described his routine, which was the same for every game he played. An hour before the match, Pele went into the locker room, picked up two towels, and retreated to a private corner. Stretching out, he placed one towel under the back of his head, like a pillow. He covered his eyes with the other. In his mind's eye he saw himself as a youngster playing soccer on the beaches of Brazil. He could feel the gentle breeze. He could smell the salt air. He remembered how much fun he had and how much he loved the game. Pele then hit the fast-forward button of his mental video. He began recalling his greatest moments in the world cup and reliving that winning feeling. Then he let those images fade and began rehearsing for the upcoming game. He pictured his opponents. He saw himself dribbling through defenders, heading shots, and scoring goals. After a half hour in solitude, alone with his thoughts and the slide show of positive images, Pele did his stretching exercises.'

I reckon if one of the best footballers of all time is using this football psychology technique then we all should. And it's something I get all my clients doing, picturing how they want to play in their next match. Picturing success!

Build on your dream game technique by picturing success for 5 minutes every day. This will take your football psychology training to 15 minutes a day and I guarantee it will make a big difference to your football image, and subsequently your self-belief and confidence

You will start to 'wire' your negative brain to be more positive. You will start to build a strong, robust, positive football image in just 15 minutes a day. You don't even have to build up a sweat.

And if you find it difficult to find time to do these two football psychology exercises, do what England goalkeeper David James did.

David James: England recall

At 34 years old David James who at that time played for Portsmouth in the English Premier League decided he wasn't too old to play for the English national team. He still felt he could progress. He still felt he could be the best goalkeeper in the country.

To help his performances become more consistent he started to use work on his football psychology and picture success. And to make picturing success a habit he made it a ritual to do it during mundane activities. So when he brushed his teeth he pictured dealing with a ball over the top of the defence; when he was stuck in a traffic jam he pictured coming for a crossed ball decisively; and when he showered he pictured making world class saves.

And so every day David James pictured success and every day he built his football image, his belief and confidence and subsequently started to perform better and better.

At the age of 39 David James played in the world cup for England.

Picture Secrets

There are two guidelines, secrets perhaps, that I'd like you to follow when using the picturing success technique.

Firstly, to make this technique as powerful as possible make sure you don't stop at just 'seeing' yourself play.

I want you to have a sensory blast! I want you to **feel** yourself play...and not just the feel of kicking a ball or the feel of making runs and having constant movement. I also want you to feel the **emotional feelings** you want...feelings of confidence, of belief, of commitment.

You have a choice here. You can see yourself control a ball that's been passed to you or you can see and feel this combined with the feeling of controlling a ball with confidence.

See yourself control the ball with confidence

Let's do this now. See the ball being drilled towards you. In your mind's eye confidently stick your foot out and deaden the pace on the ball as it hits your

foot. Control the ball perfectly. The key here is to use a feeling, a sense; an air of confidence as if it is the easiest skill in the world, almost as if it's as easy as walking up stairs.

The second secret is to make sure you picture specific things that you can control.

I despair at the notion of picturing holding aloft a trophy or even picturing winning a match. Why? Because these are things you can't control. You can't completely control how your opposition play, you can't control how your team mates play and you simply can't control what the end result will be. All you can control is yourself and no matter how much you picture 'winning' it's really not going to make much of an impact. That is pop psychology, fantasy land. Just because you picture winning doesn't mean you're going to win. It doesn't even give you a better chance.

For me the most powerful pictures are ones where you are executing specific skills successfully. Picture the technical, tactical and mental things you want to focus on and get right on match day. Those are the things you can control. And when you picture these you give yourself a better chance of executing them, which in turn gives you a better chance of contributing positively to a win.

The most powerful pictures are ones where you are executing specific skills successfully

Maybe you're a striker who wants to score more goals and one of the skills you need to get right is to find space in the penalty area with quick movement to lose your marker. You can therefore choose to picture this in the days leading up to your next match. See the ball break down the wing and feel yourself being decisive in making a run into the area. Feel confident as you make a run for the front post as you confidently pull away from your marker. See the ball come over and anticipate its trajectory and feel the confidence flow through you as you get to the ball first and connect with a glancing header that bulges the back of the net.

Effective picturing is seeing it, feeling it and doing it in your mind's eye. It's not about just seeing the ball bulge the net. In this specific example the most important moments relate to the skill of confident movement to lose the marker.

So take time every day to picture success. Make those images vivid and filled with rich sensory experiences. Make them specific to the skills you want to magnify during the game. When you commit to this process you give yourself

the best chance of being the best individual footballer you can be and the best team mate you can be.

Football Psychology Technique 4 – Magnify Strengths & Flip Weaknesses

People who are successful in life out-work, out-prepare and out-think the opposition.

People who are successful in life out-work, out-prepare and out-think the opposition

And it is the 'out-think' part that I am absolutely fascinated by. That's probably why I do the job I do.

Part of thinking successfully is the ability to magnify strengths and deal with weaknesses.

It is vital that you spend time thinking about your strengths. This is what the previous two techniques are designed to do. But it is still important to learn from and improve your weaknesses.

This is a challenge: the ability to think about your strengths more often than not to build your football image, belief and confidence. But this must be balanced with an understanding and recognition of your weaknesses.

This is what I say to my football psychology clients:

You must dwell on your strengths but acknowledge your weaknesses

Let's say that again because it's important:

You must dwell on your strengths but acknowledge your weaknesses

When you think about your football you must spend at least 80% of your time thinking about your strengths, what you do well, what works. But 20% of the time you must analyse what needs to go better. And then you have to flip the weakness.

What do I mean by 'flip' the weakness?

Once you have figured out what you are weak at you then need to **see** the weakness in a different light. You need to flip the weakness. Let me give you an example.

You think about your last match. You decide you gave the ball away too many times. You decide that your weakness is your passing. Now you flip the weakness. You need to say to yourself "Great, I'm going to work hard on passing. I'm going

to work so hard that it's going to become a strength. How exciting is that, my passing will be a strength."

Because this is an interesting fact about champions:

Champions dwell on their strengths but they acknowledge their weaknesses. And they love to work on and improve their weaknesses

I'm going to say that again because it's so, so important you understand how a champion thinks.

Champions dwell on their strengths but they acknowledge their weaknesses. And they love to work on and improve their weaknesses

You must acknowledge weaknesses and then flip them. Knowing and understanding your weaknesses and then getting excited about working on them...that's powerful. With that attitude you will inevitably improve.

With that attitude you will inevitably improve

Self-Belief: A Final Word

Self-belief is at the heart of football psychology.

How confident you are on match day is largely determined by your self-belief. Your self-belief is dictated by your football image. Your football image is mediated by how you think. Are you thinking confidently or negatively?

I know that if you think confidently off the pitch you will feel more confident on the pitch.

I know this to be true because I know, from scientific evidence, that you shape your brain by how you think.

I know that your brain is designed to recognise the negative most of the time, but if you can re-train your brain to predominantly think about your strengths, your best moments, your best games and think about future success you will build and maintain unshakeable confidence for match day.

Use the four football psychology techniques. Use them every single day. They won't intrude on your life. You need not tell anyone you are doing them. You don't need to do any extra training. Just allot a little time every day to picture your dream game and picture success. Start becoming accomplished at talking to yourself rather than listening to yourself. And start to improve your ability to think more about strengths and flipping your weaknesses.

Chapter 3: Playing With Confidence

Part One – Leading Up To The Game

There is often a great divide between performance on the training pitch and performance in the pressure cooker that is match day. The difference in feeling is often massive. Why?

The way I describe it is like this. Picture a piece of wood in front of you, say a metre wide. Let's hoist this wood a couple of metres into the air.

Do you think you can walk across it without falling? Of course! Easy, right? If the piece of wood was about ten metres in length how long do you think it would take you to walk from one side to the other? Not too long right?

Now let's change my simple challenge. Let's hoist that piece of wood 1000 metres into the air.

Do you think you can walk across it now? Not so easy? How long would it take you to walk from one end to the other? Probably quite a bit longer than when the wood was closer to the ground.

Now, the task is still the same. But what has changed? Your perception of the task that's what: "If I mess up I'm going to die." You now feel fear. The task is not as easy. Your mindset changes; you focus on the negatives and you doubt yourself. Your body changes: you tremble and you feel butterflies.

Your mindset changes; you focus on the negatives and you doubt yourself. Your body changes: you tremble and you feel butterflies

You'll probably get across okay, if you dare to try. But if you do go for it will you walk in the same cocky manner in which you walked when the wood was a couple of metres off the ground? Probably more carefully I would think. And the more careful you are the more you compound the fear.

Thousands of footballers can play in training, and they can play seriously well. It's easy, it's just football; but when it comes to match day their football psychology changes. Suddenly they feel they have to get it right. They can't afford to make a mistake, they can't let anyone down, and they have to be perfect...

Or do they?

Perfectionism: Your Best Friend and Worst Enemy

We all want to play the perfect game. As a football psychologist I work with hundreds of footballers who work hard to play the perfect game.

Whenever we step foot on a football pitch we want to make all our passes, dominate the opposition, win every tackle. We want to have the kind of movement that finds space, and we want to win every header.

This kind of attitude is admirable. It sounds like the mindset of a player with great football psychology. And indeed often perfectionism in football can be your best friend. It can help drive you to train harder. It can help motivate you and can help you play with passion. A perfectionist may set tough to attain goals and may dream high.

Many of the world's great players have a hint of perfectionism about their attitude and character.

But the attitude of perfectionism can be destructive, especially when directed to match day.

I believe that world class footballers strive for perfectionism in training but intuitively understand that they won't attain it, and most importantly they understand that when it comes to match day perfectionism should be put aside for fun, freedom and focus.

World class footballers understand that when it comes to match day perfectionism should be put aside for fun, freedom and focus

Footballers who are slaves to perfectionism will play with one or two side effects: fear or anger.

Perfectionists may play with fear or anger

Yes, perfectionists release a cocktail of chemicals into their bloodstream that creates fear or anger which suppresses their game.

Fear and anger suppresses the perfectionist's game

Those perfectionists who tend to get angry at themselves on the pitch are often ones who go into a game with too high expectations. They say to themselves "I'm going to score a hat-trick today" and when, at half time they haven't scored they start to get angry, stop focusing correctly and start losing confidence.

Alternatively, perfectionists may say to themselves “I’m going to keep a clean sheet today” and when they go a goal down they stop focusing correctly and start to lose confidence.

Those perfectionists who tend to play with fear do so because they don’t want to make mistakes. They don’t want to take risks.

I mean why take risks when perfectionism requires you complete every pass perfectly? The perfectionist passes backwards and sideways, not just once or twice but nearly always.

The perfectionist passes backwards and sideways, not just once or twice but nearly always

The perfectionist may hide. The perfectionist may lose focus because he is too busy berating himself for mistakes.

If you think you are too much the perfectionist or if you recognise this in some of your team I’d like to give you two football psychology techniques and three general football psychology philosophies to combat perfectionism.

Football Psychology Techniques to Combat Perfectionism

Firstly, the perfectionist who has too high expectations should set mini process goals rather than performance or outcome goals. And, if I may, I’d like you to wait for the next section of this book for more details on how to set these types of goals.

Secondly, and in line with the football psychology technique in the previous chapter on picturing success I’d like you to take some time to picture what it looks like to play with fun and freedom. This is important because the perfectionist has little or no chance of playing with fun and freedom.

Take a few minutes to build the scene in your mind.

You are on the pitch, you are having fun and you are playing with complete unadulterated freedom. You are loose, you are free, you are fearless, you are committed, and you are decisive.

What does this look and feel like?

What does it look and feel like in the air, in the tackle, with your movement?

What is your body language like? How loud and vocal are you?

What does fun and freedom look and feel like? Blow it up in your mind. Make it big, bold and bright.

Done that? Great! Now do it every day.

And I don't want you to stop there. I want you to take those feelings and sensations into training with you. I want you free, loose, decisive and committed. I want you on your toes, alert, energised and ready.

And the crucial thing here in training, the most important thing that must become a habit and a pattern is that you mustn't let anything or anyone take you away from your feelings of fun and freedom.

Let nothing and no-one take you away from your feelings of fun and freedom

This is so, so important. Let me repeat it. Think about it...then do it

Let nothing and no-one take you away from your feelings of fun and freedom

You dictate your attitude on the pitch. Not the opposition, not the fans, not the weather, not the state of the pitch. You dictate your ability to play with fun and freedom and with confidence.

You dictate your ability to play with fun and freedom and with confidence

The Philosophies to Combat Perfectionism

- A footballer who constantly strives for perfection has to understand that football is a game of imperfection. It is too hard a game to get everything right and a big part of being human is getting things wrong. Pele didn't play perfectly. Nor did Maradona. Lionel Messi doesn't play with perfection every match. Nor did Bobby Moore or Bobby Charlton. A footballer has to love this fact as much as he loves the game itself.
- A footballer has to understand that perfectionism constricts his play, his creativity, and his decision making. He has to understand that his mind and body works best when he allows himself to play, to move and to think with a mindset dedicated to fun and freedom. Playing freely allows a player to take the necessary risks to play the ball that sets up winning goals, that helps him to make runs behind the defence and enables him to reach for awkward crossing balls.
- A footballer has to understand that with perfectionism comes anger and/or fear and that these are not the route to excellence. Playing with

focus and leaving mistakes behind him (as we shall discover in the next section of this book) will help him become the most effective and consistent footballer he can be.

Part Two – Just Before The Game

Dealing with Nerves

We've all experienced it. The big game, the decisive fixture when your season hangs in the balance, the Cup final match that you deserve to win because you've obliterated the opposition in all the previous rounds. You've been building up for this game. In any normal game you feel fine but for this one you feel really nervous.

As a football psychologist let me get this clear straight away. Some nerves before a big game are good. Why? Because they are there for a reason: to supercharge your body, to focus the mind and to improve your alertness, all qualities that are useful for a footballer. For this reason it always makes me chuckle when I hear a footballer say "I don't get nervous before a big game." Actually it's great that you get nervous.

Some nerves before a big game are good...they are there for a reason...to supercharge your body, to focus the mind and to improve your alertness

And this leads me to my first football psychology technique to combat nerves before a big game.

Football Psychology Technique 1: Love It and Live It!

Let's give you something straight off the bat here. Try not to fight them at all. Accept them. Simply see nerves as a sign that you are ready to play.

Try not to fight nerves at all. Accept them. They are a part of your football psychology

Rather than talking to yourself in a negative way strive to enjoy the feelings you are experiencing. Put a smile on your face as your heart pounds and declare to yourself how excited you feel as your body shakes a little. When you are doing this you are putting a positive spin on what so many people believe is a negative thing. How powerful is that? And you know this is what the champions do.

Champions are champions because they have learnt to **love** nerves.

Champions are champions because they have learnt to love feeling nervous

Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, David Beckham and the swimmer Michael Phelps are examples of champions who enjoy feeling nervous because they know their nervous feelings are a sign that they are ready to compete.

They have been working their backside off for years to get themselves into position to feel nervous. And when they feel it they love it. They embrace it. They accept it, and then they go play.

Nerves: love it, embrace it, accept it, then go play

Football Psychology Technique 2: Questions, Questions

When you feel nervous and this leads to doubt you will make negative statements to yourself. For example:

"I am going to mess up today"

"If I mess up I will look stupid."

"If I make a mistake I will be subbed and dropped for the next match."

As we've discussed in the previous chapter these statements are accompanied by pictures...mental pictures of you messing up...of you making a mistake and of you being substituted. And these pictures drive you deeper into this feeling of nervousness...where you will experience doubt, worry and anxiety.

If nerves are accompanied by statements of doubt, confidence building is delivered by asking oneself questions:

"What will it look like if I play with confidence?"

"What will it look like if I'm strong in the challenge?"

"What will others see when I play my best game out there today?"

"How will I have played if I was given the man of the match?"

If nerves are accompanied by statements of doubt, confidence building is delivered by asking oneself questions

These football psychology questions are very powerful. And powerful questions will make an instant profound impact on your ability to deal with pressure. Why? Because as we've discussed before:

The words you use determine the pictures you see which drives your confidence and subsequently determines your performance

When nerves are accompanied by negative statements and they remain unchecked your performances will suffer.

You must stop negative statements and start asking questions.

Questions that involve exciting, upbeat, energised words combat nervousness. They unlock your potential by directing your nervous energy toward playing your best game.

Questions unlock your potential by directing your nervous energy toward playing your best game

What questions can you ask yourself? It's limitless! Let's think of some more:

"What will it look like if I dominate the man I'm marking today?"

"What body language do I want to play with passion, commitment and excellence?"

"What will it feel like if I'm strong in every challenge?"

You see it's limitless. You can ask a question about any part of your game. The point is it gets you focusing your attention on your game rather than on your nerves; it gets you focused on playing well, rather than playing badly; and it utilises the energy your nervousness has created.

Take a few minutes now to ask yourself these questions. I bet you get a real buzz. I bet you feel good. Think about asking yourself these questions before you play. Think about how brilliantly they are going to use the energy you have flowing around your body.

Think about how brilliantly they are going to use the energy you have flowing around your body

Do make sure that your questions allow you to create big bold positive images because this will make you feel good and feeling good is the battle won when it comes to performing under pressure.

Football Psychology Technique 3: Easy Does It

If you're nervous take some deep breaths. It works!

I could go into great depth here about the nervous system and the relaxation response, but why bother.

It has become common place across the world that taking a few deep breaths lowers your heart rate and relaxes your body so you can effectively prepare to play.

What I will say is that recent scientific evidence suggests that when you are under pressure the area of your brain that deals with your focus, your thinking, and your decision making switches off and that deep breathing switches it back on again.

I will cover this a little more in the next section. In the meantime it would be useful to take a few deep breaths before you next play, especially when you feel a little nervous.

Part Three – During the Game

Squashing ANTs

Back in August 2007 I was fortunate enough to be introduced to one of the nicest footballers you could ever hope to meet. His name is Carlton Cole.

Carlton had roared onto the Premiership scene at the age of 18 scoring on his debut for Chelsea. The Chelsea manager at the time, Claudio Ranieri had called him his young lion and described him as one of the most talented young players he had ever worked with. Then it all started to go wrong and by the time I met him when he was 24 he was languishing in the West Ham reserves.

We set to work straight away and within 18 months he was not only playing for the first team at West Ham week in week out, he had also been given a call up to the England national team.

I'm often asked at coaching conferences what I did to help Carlton make the big steps he did. Well first up its important to understand that its Carlton who was the main factor. During my work with him his professionalism stood out at West Ham. It was his dedication that has got him his England caps.

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That aside my work contributed just a little to his change in fortune. So what was the secret?

We worked on many things but one of the most important factors was what Carlton was thinking on the pitch.

Because what you think on the pitch is vitally important.

Every thought you think on the pitch counts. Every thought every second of the game impacts performance

I'm going to repeat that because it can't be emphasised enough.

Every thought you think on the pitch counts. Every thought every second of the game impacts performance

And like many footballers Carlton suffered from ANTs when he played. No, not the creepy crawly insect ants. What I mean are automatic negative thoughts.

A for automatic

N for negative

T for thoughts

ANTs = Automatic Negative Thoughts

It is difficult if not impossible to play with confidence when you think in a negative way.

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Everyone suffers from ANTs. This is because, if you remember from chapter 2, the brain is hardwired to be negative.

ANTs tend to get louder out on the pitch when you are competing.

ANTs tend to get louder out on the pitch when you are competing

Let me give you an example of some ANTs on the pitch

After a missed chance to score: "I can't believe I missed that chance. I'm never going to score today"

After missing an easy pass: "Agh! If I keep giving the ball away like that I'm gonna get subbed. Stop messing up"

After missing yet another tackle as a defender: "Wow this striker is quick; he's just too good for me."

ANTs kill your game. How?

Well remember that football is a game of speed of thought and decision making. When you fill your brain with these negative thoughts your speed of thought slows, you become less decisive, and your awareness and anticipation suffer.

ANTs kill your game. They fill up your brain and slow you down physically and mentally

Have a think about a time on the pitch when you were thinking negatively, perhaps being critical of yourself. Think back. Were you the best you could be at that moment? Could you have received a pass when you were talking to yourself negatively? Could you have made an effective decision? Could you have moved into space quickly? Could you have even seen the space available?

If the answer is no then you failed in your task to play your best for the entire match. You failed in your task to be the best team mate you could be on the day.

Perhaps worst of all ANTs will cause your brain to release the kind of chemicals that suppress your movement; your ability to execute your technique will simply disappear.

Remember, this game is about inches and seconds. ANTs eat up inches and seconds. They prevent you from playing well as an individual and as a team mate.

ANTs eat up inches and seconds

Have a think about your ANTs. What are they? When do you get them? What do they do to your performance?

Negative thoughts on the pitch must be stopped as quickly as possible. ANTs must be squashed before they are allowed to multiply, before there is an infestation of ANTs.

ANTs must be squashed before there is an infestation of ANTs

Technique: SPOT STOP SHIFT

This is a very simple but very powerful technique I teach all my clients. But Carlton Cole really embraced this. It was this technique that was a big part of the process in going from reserve team player to England international. He used this week in week out in his matches in the English Premier League to make sure he was thinking effectively at all times.

STOP

Psychologists always preach that awareness is the first step in change. I couldn't agree more and it's fair to say that it's a real skill to recognise when you get a little negative on the pitch.

But this really is the start of dealing with ANTs because to be quite honest footballers are rarely aware of how they think on the pitch. Many footballers play in a state of blissful ignorance lurching from one negative thought to the next.

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So just like Carlton your job is to start recognising or noticing when you think negatively.

Or as I like to say "Spot the ANT."

This is more difficult than you may think. Largely because when you set foot on the pitch you are there to play football, not to analyse yourself. In fact some forms of analysis can be distracting (as we shall discuss in the next section.)

You can start this process away from the pitch. Have a think now about some of the negative thoughts you have. When do they tend to come in? There is often a pattern to your ANTs. Maybe it's when you miss a few chances or lose the ball or go a goal down. Taking some time to think about when you have ANTs during the game can improve your awareness on the pitch.

A second step is to improve your awareness in training. Whilst this isn't the same as playing under the pressure a match delivers it will still provide a fair reflection on when your ANTs tend to come happen. And it will allow you to improve your SPOTTING ability.

But I'm afraid at some point you will have to start improving your SPOTTING during a game itself. Go easy on yourself. You won't SPOT all the ANTs all the time straight away. This is a skill and it will take time.

STOP

When you SPOT an ANT your task is then to STOP the ANT.

In other words your task is to stop your negative inner voice instantly.

Again I can't emphasise enough how important it is to terminate negative thoughts quickly. The more ANTs you have the more you fill your brain with the

wrong kind of thinking. The brain slows down, you slow down. To be a great footballer you can't afford to slow down physically and mentally.

To be a great footballer you can't afford to slow down physically and mentally

So STOP the wrong thoughts. How?

Simple! Just see a STOP sign in your mind. Or perhaps say STOP to yourself. You can scream it in your mind. STOP! You can see a big red STOP sign, the one you see on the side of a road. You need something that you can consciously see or say that will snap you back into the present moment and instantly stop the negative thought from spreading.

Just like SPOTTING the ANT, STOPPING requires practice. Spend time SPOTTING and STOPPING during training. In fact spend time practicing them in your everyday life. We all get plenty of negative thoughts a day, which provide opportunities to practice this technique.

SHIFT

Ok you've SPOTTED the ANT, you've STOPPED the ANT, now you have to SHIFT it.

You have to SHIFT your negative thoughts to something more positive. We need that confident thinking again.

Actually on the pitch you need two types of thinking:

- Confident
- Helpful

Confident Thinking

We covered confident thinking in the last chapter. But let's discuss how we can think confidently on the pitch, in the moment, when it's most critical.

Learning to Say No

You have to become an expert at saying no to yourself.

What do I mean? Well we have an ANT, for example "this defender is too good today."

You are able to SPOT it and then STOP it. Then to SHIFT the ANT you have to say "NO."

Just as you deny the opposition space to play you have to deny the ANT room in your brain. It cannot be allowed to grow.

You must say “NO!” You cannot allow the ANT to grow

Have an ‘I Can’ Mentality

Once you’ve denied the ANT space you must immediately SHIFT into a more positive mindset. You must become an ‘I can’ person.

“NO, I CAN....”

For example:

“NO, I CAN score today.”

“NO, I CAN beat this full back. I CAN get the better of him.”

“NO, I CAN out jump this striker.”

“NO, WE CAN win this today.”

“NO, I CAN keep this work rate up.”

You have to deny ANTs space in your brain. You have to say “NO.” Then you have to SHIFT to the positive. You have to be an “I CAN” player.

As an “I CAN” player you release a cocktail of brain chemicals such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and dopamine that drive you toward your goals. They sustain your effort. They keep you focused. They keep the prize in mind. They keep you working hard. They manage your co-ordination with excellence. They maintain your awareness, anticipation and decision making.

An “I CAN” player releases a cocktail of brain chemicals such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and dopamine that drive you toward your goals

This is mental toughness. Settle for anything less and you won’t be the best you can be. You won’t be the best individual you can be. You won’t be ***dominant, strong and powerful. You won’t be sharp, hard working and committed.***

And this was my message to Carlton Cole at the time. That he commit himself to this process.

He had to SPOT the ANT and STOP the ANT. And then he had to SHIFT the ANT. He had to learn to say “NO.” Then he had to be an “I CAN” player.

Helpful Thinking: Where Mind and Body Meet

Confident thinking may be enough for you. It will certainly help you play much more consistent football. It's enough to help carry you through challenging games. Use it and you will be a much tougher player.

But you can do more. You can think in a way that goes beyond the vital 'I can' mentality. You can learn to think in a helpful way.

You can learn to think in a helpful way

What do I mean by helpful?

Well to me great footballers are fantastic problem solvers.

Great footballers are fantastic problem solvers

Helpful thinking is about finding solutions to the problems the game brings. Let me give you an example:

You are a defender who is constantly losing the aerial battle with a strong and tall striker. He's getting his head on the ball every time. Because of this you get an ANT "I'm never going to win a header today and they may score from a flick on." You SPOT the ANT and STOP the ANT, and you say "NO, I CAN win these headers against him."

Now is the time to start thinking helpfully. You have to think of a solution to the problem of losing headers. So in this situation it might be timing your jump better, or getting in front of the striker, or being slightly more aggressive with your jump. It may even require a quick chat with the coach to see if you can get the other centre back to mark the striker.

So helpful thinking is related to the technical and tactical sides of the game.

I'm not detracting from the 'I can' mentality. It's your first port of call and will be enough to help you play better. It will certainly squash the ANT. But to be a complete player you have to be able to find solutions to your challenges. You need to be able to talk to yourself about these solutions and then you have to take action on them.

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Being Proactive

Confident thinking and helpful thinking is all about being proactive. Too many footballers are reactive on the pitch. They simply react to everything that happens around them. This is lazy. A champion footballer is one who is proactive with his responses.

A champion footballer is one who is proactive with his responses

A champion footballer is one who refuses to let ANTs take a hold. He squashes them by SPOTTING them, then STOPPING them, then SHIFTING them by saying “NO, I CAN.” Then the champion soccer player thinks helpfully by finding technical and tactical solutions to his in game problems.

A proactive mindset is a champion’s mindset

Summary

- Perfectionism can motivate but can also damage if not destroy a footballer’s game.
- Keep perfectionism under control by accepting football is a game of imperfection and by choosing to play with fun, freedom and focus
- Nerves must be seen as a sign of readiness
- Taking deep breaths can help calm you down
- Players must squash ANTs before they take hold
- Players must become ‘I CAN’ players
- Players must talk to themselves in a helpful way on the pitch. This is where mind and body meet.

PART TWO

FOCUS

Chapter 4

Improving Your Football Focus

I remember the first ever meeting I had with a football manager. He told me that if I helped his players improve their focus he would use me as his football psychology consultant for the rest of his working life. He put the skill of focus on a pedestal and explained to me that the small mistakes made by footballer often stem from a lack of focus, from switching off for a few vital seconds.

I agree. Focus in football is vital. A player can be immensely talented, have great technique and yet his career may falter due to poor focus.

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A lack of focus leads to mistakes, to indecision, to a lack of awareness and anticipation.

Take your mind off the game for a second and you can cause problems for yourself and your team mates. Serious problems!

The footballer who tends to switch off cannot respond appropriately to the demands of the game. For me more goals are conceded due to lapses in concentration than for any other reason. And more games are lost due to players switching off for a split second meaning they fail to take opportunities, they allow the opposition to get to the ball first, they concede sloppy free kicks and they spill crosses at vital times.

Before we get onto simple techniques to help you develop your football focus let me explain to you a little about the processes underlying focus.

Your Football Brain: Focus

So we're back to the brain again. I want you to have a little understanding of what part of the brain you need to function well to play focused football.

Think about this in your everyday life. Do you sometimes find your mind wandering off when you should be focused on a training session or when you're doing a piece of work? Perhaps you find your mind wandering when you're talking to someone. Perhaps you find your mind wandering as you read this book. I hope not!

Minds' tend to wander. And this is no different on the football pitch, and no matter how good you are and no matter how much you love the game your mind can, and probably will drift from time to time. Add to that the fact that football is just so quick and there is often loads of information your brain has to take in then it's a real challenge.

Football is just so quick and with so much information your brain has to take in it's a real challenge to maintain focus

The most important part of the brain for our football performance is the front part, the part of the brain just behind your forehead. This is the part that helps you think, focus, plan, make decisions, recognise patterns, interpret, manage emotions and plays a big role in muscle coordination.

That's a seriously heavy job the front brain has. It manages and controls the skills that are vital football skills. Your ability to execute your technical, tactical and physical skills is largely determined by this part of the brain.

The front brain manages and controls the skills that are vital football skills

And you need the front brain to stay switched on. In fact it is imperative that the front brain stays switched on.

It is imperative the front brain stays switched on

If you're a defender you need the front brain switched on to keep anticipating the runs the striker you're marking makes. You need the front brain switched on to work out the body shape you need at any given time to get the best view of the movement of the opposition. You need the front brain switched on to time your jumps to win the aerial battle.

As a striker you need the front brain switched on to make the right runs, to find space, to pull away from a defender, to time a shot that's been passed across the penalty box. You need the front brain switched on to see space, to act on that information and to control the ball when it's slotted through to you.

As a goalkeeper you need the front brain switched on for you to make the decision to come for the crossing ball. You need the front brain switched on to anticipate the direction the penalty will be struck. You need the front brain switched on to command your defenders at all times.

As a midfielder you need the front brain switched on to decide the best ball to play at any given moment. You need the front brain switched on to win your

tackles. You need your front brain switched on to get box to box and to link up play with the strikers.

The front brain is vital. It must stay switched on. It is the engine room of your game intelligence and the crucial juncture where mind and body meet.

The front brain is vital. It must stay switched on. It is the engine room of your game intelligence and the crucial juncture where mind and body meet

The front brain, the part so important to our performance has a very small capacity. This task demonstrates that the front brain is easily overwhelmed. Fill it with the wrong things and it will switch off. It won't function as well as it should.

In the Introduction I talked about brain fact one: the brain works in milliseconds and in Chapter One I gave you brain fact two: the brain is hardwired to be negative. Now I'm going to introduce you to another brain fact.

Brain fact three: the front brain is small

And this brain fact impacts our ability to focus. This is why focus in life, and on the soccer pitch is so elusive. We can be focused one minute then lose it the next.

It's weird isn't it? The area of the brain that handles so many important skills is tiny. It's minute. It can be easily overwhelmed by all the information that bombards you during a game of football. And when it becomes overwhelmed it can switch off and then your focus switches off resulting in a number of these problems:

- Poor awareness
- Slower thinking
- Slow to anticipate
- Slower or non-existent decision making
- Slower movement
- Poor co-ordination and technique

That front brain switching off is a killer. We need to keep it switched on so we can focus better. So how do you keep that front brain switched on and how do you improve your focus?

The Focus Secret

Well let's give you a football focus secret that will help you start your journey to better focus. The secret is this:

In football it's not about having 'more' focus. It's not about going into some deep trance state. Let's get rid of that notion straight away. In soccer it's all about where you 'place' your focus.

In football it's not about more focus, it's about where you place your focus

The best footballers don't have some Zen like focus that mere mortals can't aspire to. They simply direct their focus on the most appropriate things during a game. Things that help them execute their technique and tactical game plan to the best of their ability.

Place your focus on the wrong things and your front brain gets filled up and you can't be the best you can be.

Where To Place Your Focus

This is an exercise I do with clients all the time. It kicks off a great session about focus.

I always start with a list like the one below and ask my client "What from this list can you NOT control, what can you influence and what can you control." So to clarify that's control, influence and cannot control. Have a go yourself:

- The weather
- The result
- The referee
- Your thoughts
- A mistake you've just made
- Ball control
- The state of the pitch
- You scoring a goal
- How long there is to go
- Jumping high
- Winning a header
- Work rate
- The opposition

No doubt some you found easy, while others might have made you think a little. Let's categorise them:

Can't Control

- Weather
- A mistake you've made
- The state of the pitch
- How long there is to go

There are probably quite a few in there that may have surprised you. The most obvious ones are the weather and the state of the pitch. It's fairly obvious we can't control those aspects. And yet how many soccer players focus on them? Do you focus on them? Have a think about this? How many footballers focus on them to the point where this focus damages their game? Have you focused on the things you can't control to the point where it's damaged your game? If so it can drive you to think negatively. For example:

"It's raining, I hate playing in the rain."

"The pitch is really cut up. I don't fancy passing on this surface."

That kind of inner voice starts with a focus on things you can't control.

What about a mistake you've made? Well you can't control what's happened in the past can you? Not unless you have a time machine. So focusing on this isn't very effective.

And what about how long there is to go? Again, nothing you can control regarding time. That's the referee's domain and not one to be focused on.

For me a football fact is this: avoid focusing on the things you can't control at all costs. Focusing on what you can't control takes you away from your most important tasks on the pitch.

Focusing on what you can't control takes you away from your most important tasks on the pitch

The things you can't control fill up the front part of the brain. They play havoc with your emotions, confidence, game intelligence and game intensity.

Influence

- The result
- The referee

- You scoring a goal
- Winning a header
- The opposition

Things we can influence are always interesting ones. It's a category for elements of the game that we can't completely control but nor are they completely out of our control. Our examples paint this picture.

The referee can't be controlled but you can certainly influence him. The same can be said for the opposition. You cannot control the opposing striker as a defender but you can influence him (hopefully to play poorly.) Similarly you might think scoring a goal or winning a header is completely within your control. Well, they're not. And focusing on these can in fact be quite damaging.

Another Carlton Cole Story

When Carlton first broke into the first team at West Ham and started to play regular first team Premier League matches it was amazing how many people around him were saying "You've got to score. Today you've got to make things count."

It's fair to say that during the early days Carlton was never a prolific scorer. But he turned that around and during the 2009/2010 season he scored regularly, at one time he scored six games in a row; a pretty good record for a striker regarded as a 'hold up striker.'

One of the reasons behind his improvement lay in one consistent message I said to him. A message I relayed to him over and over during sessions, on the phone and by text.

The message was this:

"Stop focusing on trying to score goals. Stop listening to those people who tell you that you have to score. Start focusing on the things that will help you to score. Focus on them like your life depends on them. Then scoring will take care of itself."

That was my simple message and that got Carlton focusing his attention on the pitch in the right direction.

What he started to know and understand was that he couldn't completely control scoring. Some days defenders are going to have awesome days. Some days goalkeepers are going to save the impossible. Some days the ball just isn't going to run for you. You can't completely control scoring.

Carlton started to know and understand that he could only influence scoring. He could only do the things, the great habits that would help him to score. That's all.

Carlton started to know and understand that he could only influence scoring. He could only do the things, the great habits that would help him to score

This attitude, focus and philosophy took an enormous amount of pressure off him. He was free to enjoy his game and express himself on the pitch.

So you can only influence scoring. And you can only influence winning a header. Maybe the guy you are marking is much taller than you or more athletic. Maybe he has a higher leap. You can't control that.

So what can you control?

Control

- Your thoughts
- Ball control
- Jumping high
- Work rate

So here are the things we can control from our original list. And these are perfect things to focus on.

Can you control your thoughts? Of course! How you react and respond, whether you deal with ANTs effectively, whether you think about playing a great game or not. These are things we can control.

Can we control our first touch, jumping high and our work rate? Of course! We can't control winning headers but we can control jumping high with strength and with dominance. We can choose to work as hard as we possibly can in that last lung busting 10 minutes of time. It's tough to do but it's a choice.

So What Does ALL This Mean?

Simple! I always say to my clients, you should:

- Ignore what you can't control. These must not be focused on
- Recognise what you can influence. Allow a brief focus on them
- Immerse yourself on what you can control. These bring success

Focusing on the things we can control keeps the front part of the brain switched on.

Focusing on the things we can control keeps the front part of the brain switched on

And what do the things we can control have in common? Well they are all about you. You control you. When you go out on that football pitch you control you, and that is where your main focus should be, on you, on managing yourself.

When you go out on that football pitch you control you, and that is where your main focus should be, on you, on managing yourself

Having an awesome focus for 90 minutes means ignoring what we can't control. It means growing the skill of recognising but not dwelling on the things we can only influence. And it requires a mind that focuses tightly on yourself, on doing the key habits that will help you be the best individual you can be and the best team mate you can be.

The Me, The Now, The Script: A Focus Philosophy

A few years ago I was having a beer with a mate who happened to be coaching an amateur team at the time. We were chatting about all things football and he was quizzing me on some of the mental aspects of the game. During the discussion my mate asked me about the last 10 minutes of a game. He told me that his team were always letting in goals at this crucial period. He went on to say that they always seemed distracted, sometimes it appeared they focused on not conceding before the final whistle and at other times it appeared they had no focus at all.

While we were chatting about his team's challenges I came out with a line, a mantra if you like that neatly sums up all the elements of focus a footballer needs. The line was:

The Me, The Now, The Script

Ok, so what does that mean? Well let's take it step by step.

The Me

Look back at the list. Is there anything you can control that isn't you?

The reality is there is only one thing on the pitch when you play football that you can truly control. That is you.

There is only one thing on the pitch when you play football that you can truly control...you

This means your focus should be predominantly on you. This is what I call 'the me.'

If I was to set foot on a football pitch I would place my focus on me. I would understand that it is only 'me' that I can control and I would set out to manage myself: my reactions and my responses, my technique, my game plan and tactics, my role and responsibility.

Focusing on 'the me' doesn't mean you completely ignore the opposition, the referee, your coach, the crowd and your teammates. Focusing on 'the me' helps you to understand that you can only control you and helps you deal effectively with the things you can influence. Let me put this practically:

You're a defender playing against a very skilful striker. On a few occasions in the first half he gets the better of you and scores a goal and gets an assist. It's easy to feel down in this kind of situation. It's easy to think that he's too good for you. It's easy to start dwelling on how skilful he is and how you are never going to stop him. This is a situation where your focus is on the wrong thing. It's predominantly on the opposition and you need to get your focus back onto 'the me.' You need to be thinking about yourself and what you can do to stop the striker influencing the game.

In this situation you need to be saying to yourself "Come on, stop focusing so much on him and start focusing on me. Come on, focus on me."

And it is in a situation like this and others like it when you need to get back to the confident and helpful thinking that I introduced you to in the last chapter.

When your mind wanders onto the opposition too much because of how well they are playing you need to focus on 'the me' and start talking to yourself confidently and helpfully.

In this way you will be the best you can be in the moment. By switching your focus onto 'the me' and then by thinking in a confident and helpful way you will give yourself the best opportunity to deal with the toughest challenges on the pitch.

The Now

We can't change the past, we can't control the past. As in life it's the same on the football pitch. A focus on the mistake you made 10 minutes ago can damage your game. It can slow your thinking, anticipation and your decision making.

As a footballer you must commit yourself to letting go of the past during a match. He will give himself more chance of playing with freedom and with precision if you escape the mental prison of past actions.

A footballer must commit himself to letting go of the past during a match. He will give himself more chance of playing with freedom and with precision

It's too easy to look back and think "I wish I had done this differently, I wish I had done that differently." Yes it is important to learn from the past, to analyze what has happened to improve as a player and as a person. But not during a game! During a game the past must be history. It must be forgotten. Otherwise you are not focusing on the right thing in the present moment.

Likewise it's easy to get ahead of yourself and look to the future during a match. Projecting yourself to the future during a game is a waste of energy, is a focus destroyer and damages your confidence.

Projecting yourself to the future during a game is a waste of energy, is a focus destroyer and damages your confidence

How can you play with freedom if you're worrying about something that hasn't happened yet? How can you play with movement, anticipation, and awareness when you're asking the referee how long there is to go?

How can you play with movement, anticipation, and awareness when you're asking the referee how long there is to go?

This is negative thinking at its worse. You're thinking about your worst case scenario, "What if they score?" How can you play your natural free flowing game? You will play within yourself because your focus is on not wanting to make mistakes. Ironically this increases the chance of you making mistakes. It increases the chance of the situation you don't want to happen to actually happen.

When you focus on the past or the future during a match you are literally taking your eye off the ball.

When you focus on the past or the future during a match you are literally taking your eye off the ball

What's important, what your focus needs to be on is the 'now.' Right here, right now.

What's important, what your focus needs to be on is the 'now.' Right here, right now

What you need to be focusing on while reading this book is this book. Not what you're going to do tonight or what your mate said to you an hour ago that annoyed you.

When you step out on to the training pitch all that matters is that training session. And during that training session you must focus your mind tightly on each drill, not the drill that's just been, nor the small sided game that's to come. You must keep your mind in the present moment. You must discipline your mind to listen to the feedback your coaches and team-mates give you. You must think about the skill you are working on in the drill?

And when you come to the match your mind must focus tightly on each and every second as they happen. Your concentration has got to be in the moment.

When you come to the match your mind must focus tightly on each and every second as they happen. Your concentration has got to be in the moment

When you keep your focus in 'the now' you give yourself the best chance of being proactive with your responses to all the challenges that are thrown at you during a match. You can anticipate with speed, you can make quick decisions. There will be nothing labored about you.

Remember: every second counts during a match. Every second brings with it an opportunity to succeed or to fail. You must have a mind trained to stay in 'the now.'

Your Match Script

So our focus needs to be on 'the me' and in 'the now.' This is the optimal focus.

How can you help yourself to stay on 'the me' and 'the now'? The answer is to set what I call a match 'script.'

Your script are two or three things you want to execute during the game that help focus your mind on 'the me' and 'the now.' Let me give you some examples:

- Non-stop movement
- Win my headers: time jumps
- Push winger on the outside at all times

- Work hard – box to box
- Talk to myself confidently at all times
- Focus on me
- Be strong in every challenge
- Be dominant on a crossing ball

So these are some examples. I always recommend that you have 2 types of script: one relating to your role and responsibilities and another relating to managing yourself, or in other words something mental.

Try to have just 2 or a maximum of 3 processes. Remember we are trying to engage the front brain, not fill it up. I also recommend you avoid setting a script revolving around technique. Working on your technique should be reserved for the training ground. During a match you need to trust your technique, otherwise you'll overload your front brain.

Let me give you some more examples of a script. Because I want you to get this very clear in your mind.

A recent session with a striker led to these 3 scripts: one, 'non-stop movement for 90 minutes'; two, 'be a constant threat in the area'; three, 'stay upbeat no matter what happens.' Now this was a Premiership striker and the script doesn't need to get any more complicated than this.

Let me explain this striker's script further. He wanted a movement script to remind him to work hard off the ball, because this is when he tends to score; when he worked hard. This was also when the manager praised him most; when he worked hard for the team. The second script required him to get in the box more and make a nuisance of himself in the area. When he did this he gave himself a great chance of finding space and scoring. His third script reminded him to stay positive at all times as he tended to get a little down after mistakes or when the team goes a goal down.

A script enables a footballer to run onto the pitch with simple things to focus on. They help him ignore the things he can't control.

A script enables a footballer to run onto the pitch with simple things to focus on. They help him ignore the things he can't control

You want to win the match, ***focus on your script***. You want to win your personal battle against the guy you're marking, ***focus on your script***. You want to score, ***focus on your script***. You want to keep a clean sheet, ***focus on your script***. Your script drives your focus and subsequently drive your performance.

Your script drives your focus and subsequently drives your performance

Now if you find yourself getting distracted by the uncontrollable, or dwelling too much on what you can only influence then apply my simple SPOT STOP SHIFT technique that I introduced to you in the last chapter. SPOT that you're being distracted. Say STOP to yourself or see a STOP sign. Then shift your focus of attention back onto your script.

If you find yourself getting distracted then SPOT STOP SHIFT

Let me give you an example of SPOT STOP SHIFT in action. Let's take the same striker from earlier. He started to SPOT that he wasn't working as hard in the second half as he did in the first. He said to himself "Right STOP. Let's get back to this process of movement. Let's get my movement going and work harder." So he then shifted back to his script.

But I Like To Play With a Blank Mind

And yes this is how most of football works and how your brain should work on the pitch. Most of your game should be instinctive, reflexive and executed without thinking.

But the idea of completely blanking your mind and just going and playing is one of the biggest myths in football and in sport for that matter.

One of the biggest myths in football and in sport for that matter is playing with a blank mind

Absolutely, we don't want to clutter our mind, we don't want to think too much. But having a script actually works to unclutter the mind by directing the brain to focus solely on the areas of your game that are important and on areas of the game that you can control. And a script enables you to deal with the inevitable distractions the game creates on a minute by minute basis. With several simple scripts to focus on you give yourself a better chance of climbing into the zone.

Summary

- A lack of focus leads to mistakes, to indecision, to a lack of awareness and anticipation
- The front brain manages focus but is small and switches off easily
- It's not about more focus, it's about where you place your focus
- Focus on the things you can control: the me, the now, the script

Chapter 5

Managing Match Intensity

Football is physically demanding. In fact when I first started working in football I was surprised at how physical the sport actually was. To express your physicality on the pitch you have to play with intensity, and you must maintain this intensity for 90 minutes. And that's an enormous challenge. It isn't easy to accomplish.

To express your physicality on the pitch you have to play with intensity, and you must maintain this intensity for 90 minutes

I can't emphasise how important playing at the right intensity is in football. Intensity makes a difference to your speed of thought, to your ability to make quick decisions (and correct decisions), to your awareness and anticipation; essentially to your game intelligence. It also makes a difference to your confidence.

What is match intensity? Intensity is your physical activity and mental alertness.

Intensity is your physical activity and mental alertness

Essentially it's a form of focus; being ready to perform and being alert during performance. In the language of football it's being 'up for it.'

Whilst vitally important it isn't easy to find the right level of intensity nor to maintain intensity. The game throws up so many situations that can lessen or increase our intensity.

It isn't easy to find the right intensity nor to maintain intensity. The game throws up so many situations that can lessen or increase our intensity

Think about your match intensity. What is the right level for you? To answer this question you might have to think about your best games or times when you feel you played at an optimum level.

Do you manage to maintain it for 90 minutes? If not what lessens your intensity?

Let me give you a couple of examples of intensity destroyers:

- Mistakes
- Going a goal down

- Intimidation from the opposition
- Great play from the opposition
- The crowd
- Your coach
- Your team mates

It's important to be clear. You can't play at 100% physical intensity for 90 minutes. Nor can you be mentally alert at all times. That isn't practical and it's not what the game demands. But you have to be both physically and mentally alert for as much of the 90 minutes as is possible.

Interestingly, what I've discovered from my work as a football psychology consultant is that playing at the right intensity for 90 minutes just doesn't come naturally to some people, especially those who tend to be a little more laid back in everyday life.

What about you? How often do you let your performances dip because your intensity drops? Do you find it difficult to maintain your intensity? Are you a pretty laid back person who finds it tough to have a 'game face'?

Of course someone who is physically fit is going to find it easier to manage his physical intensity levels. However, intensity is very much a mindset as well.

So how do you manage your intensity? Well you either want your intensity to increase or to decrease during a game. Let's look at increasing intensity first of all. I'm going to illustrate the first technique by way of a real life case study.

Stokesy the Greyhound

In December 2009 I was fortunate enough to receive a phone call asking me to meet with a young Irish footballer called Anthony Stokes. 'Stokesy' had been labelled the best young player in Ireland at the age of 14 and was bought by Arsenal for one million pounds. Things didn't work out at Arsenal and he had gone on to play a few games for Sunderland before leaving for the Scottish Premier league team Hibernian. Those around him understandably felt his career wasn't living up to expectation. As a striker he had scored just 4 goals in a season and a half. Things just weren't working for him.

Over the next year of working with me he went onto score 23 goals and got a dream move to Celtic. His success was down to his desire to put things right in his game and his ability to take on board the technique I am about to describe.

Now for me there are 2 types of footballer: the artist and the warrior. The English Premier League tends to be full of warriors; those who are strong, dominant,

aggressive footballers who battle for 90 minutes. On the Continent of Europe, say in Italy and Spain, domestic football tends to be crammed full of artists. Neither is right nor wrong however a complete player has a little of both.

During my first session with Stokesy it became apparent that he was very much the artist. On the pitch he had great vision, awareness and speed of thought and could weight a pass perfectly. However, at times during the game he displayed a serious lack of intensity. I strongly believed he could become a better team mate as well as score more goals with a greater feeling of intensity. He had to become more of a warrior. But he had to do this without sacrificing the artist within him.

Now don't get me wrong, his lack of intensity wasn't because he didn't want to work hard for himself and for the team. He had always been passionate about winning and about scoring goals. However, he's naturally a laid back guy and he had been a little guilty of taking that side of his personality out onto the pitch with him. No-one had ever taught him how to have a 'game face.'

I'm pretty sure I was the first person in his professional life to explain to him the intensity issues that lay before him. I explained to him that this could be learnt, he could change things. Just like everything else in football, performance intensity is a skill and we set about improving his intensity so he could work harder for the team, defend from the front better, get into better positions and become a more consistent goal scorer.

The strategy I introduced to Stokesy and want to introduce to you is based on a combination of body language, visualisation and emotional management. It is a strategy I call the 'animal technique.'

Football Psychology Technique One: Animal

This is the process I took Anthony through. Have a go yourself.

I asked Anthony what it would look like if he performed with more intensity on the pitch in a match. He said he would be constantly on his toes and on the move. He said he would come deep to collect the ball and would go out wide to make a challenge. He would press defenders and try to get the ball back if he lost it. He said he would be a constant pain for the defenders. He also said he would be sharp in his movement to make space to receive the ball. He would be constantly looking for space.

Once he had a clear picture of this I asked him quite a strange question. "If you were an animal playing like this what animal would you be?" I helped put my question into perspective by telling him that it probably wouldn't be a tortoise

as tortoises are slow and lethargic creatures. I asked him what animal he pictured when he thought of the kind of work rate and intensity he was envisioning.

Admittedly he had a bit of a laugh at my question but after thinking about it for a minute or so he came up with a 'greyhound.' I pressed him further. He said that a greyhound reminded him of running fast, being alert and sharp, always on the move, being keen, eager and hungry to run.

Right away we both loved the image of a greyhound on the pitch. So Anthony Stokes decided to play football like a greyhound.

He went to work at this right away in training. Every single training session he strove to be a greyhound on the pitch. He held an image of playing 'like a greyhound' every single day in every single training session. Straight away this technique shifted his body language, changed the pictures in his head and altered the emotions he felt on the pitch.

This technique automatically shifted his body language, changed the pictures in his head and altered the emotions he felt on the pitch

Rather than being too laid back and relaxed he started to feel more upbeat and determined. He started to feel 'up for it.' The pictures he had in his mind were images of hard work and non-stop running. His body language portrayed that of a winner; upbeat, alert and ready for battle.

If you need to play with greater intensity why not try the same technique. What do you look like in your role on the pitch when you play at the right intensity level? What is your movement like? What is your work ethic like? What about your body language? What are you like in the air? In the tackle? What is your communication like? What words best describe your actions? A few might be dominant, strong, powerful, committed.

Ok, now with a clear image in your mind of your optimum intensity level have a go at answering this question. If an animal was playing instead of you, playing your dream game, what would that animal be? What animal would have similar playing characteristics?

Your animal might be:

- Cheetah
- Gorilla
- Lion
- Greyhound

- Rottweiler
- Tiger

It sounds a little strange doesn't it but associating a performance to an animal can make a difference to your game.

Why? Well for me the main reason is because animals are superior to humans physically. When you associate your game to say a greyhound you will get pictures in your mind of running at super human speed, getting around the pitch and generally being a very hard working footballer. It's a perfect image for you to have.

Stokesy took his animal with him onto the pitch on match day. He even wrote the word 'greyhound' on his hand to remind him as he played. Whenever he SPOTTED himself losing intensity he reminded himself by saying 'GREYHOUND, GREYHOUND' in his mind. This reminder re-energised him, lifted his body language and got him on his toes ready to move, ready to lose his markers and receive the ball.

So by all means if you have an animal in mind write it on your hand before you play. Your 'animal' is a perfect cue word to keep you playing at intensity.

Technique Two: Head, Shoulders

A lot of my working life is spent preaching the benefits of body language. It sounds obvious doesn't it, to keep great body language. With footballers I want to see dynamic body language. I want you to stand confidently. I want to see you on your toes at all times with a sense of alertness and readiness. I want you to be explosive with your footwork, loud in your communication, aggressive in the challenge and strong in the air.

I want you to understand that as much as your psychology affects your physiology; your physiology affects your psychology. This is important for everyone to understand. Your psychology affects your physiology and your physiology affects your psychology.

Your psychology affects your physiology and your physiology affects your psychology

By changing your body language you can change your feelings of intensity. You will be able to work harder. You will find it easier to be strong in the air and more aggressive in the challenge.

Here's an interesting fact scientists are starting to understand more and more: your body affects how you think and feel.

Your body affects how you think and feel

When your feelings of intensity decrease all you have to do is get your body moving again. This will release the kind of chemicals into your brain and body that help you feel that intensity again. These kinds of chemicals include adrenaline nor adrenaline and dopamine. These are chemicals that sustain your effort, that keep you alert, that supercharge your body for action.

To get your body moving again at times of low intensity here is a very simple technique. In Britain there is a song that all school kids sing called "head, shoulders, knees and toes." I think this song is sung by children the world over.

I love this image of head, shoulders, knees, toes. It's a great image to have when it comes to intensity. I want to see your head up at all times, looking around and being vocal with team mates. I wanted to see you stand tall with your shoulders up. And I want to see you on your toes, willing to run and feeling on the move at all times.

Think about this. Head, shoulders, knees, toes. What do you look like with head shoulders knees toes? What do you look like when you're always looking with loud vocals, shoulders up always on your toes always on the move? Think about times when your intensity may drop off a little when you lose that bit of alertness and readiness. If you had head shoulders knees toes at the forefront of your mind you'd spring back into action.

Remember: head shoulders knees toes for 90 minutes.

Technique Three: Slowly Does It

Let's now chat about playing with too much intensity. If a lazy looking player is unattractive and ineffective then someone who runs around like a headless chicken on the pitch can be just as destructive to himself and the team.

Psychologists use the term 'over-arousal' for this. A player can be too highly charged for a match. He can get too involved and subsequently may not maintain his shape or position. He may also make reckless challenges.

If you want a graphic illustration of this go to youtube and type in 'Paul Gascoigne FA Cup Final.'

When Tottenham Hotspur beat Arsenal in the 1991 FA Cup semi final Paul Gascoigne was seriously pumped up. He knew he was going to be playing in the

biggest domestic soccer cup competition on the planet in front of a global audience. It was his time to shine.

Within the first 10 minutes of the final it was all over for Gascoigne. He had walked onto the pitch far too pumped. After 3 minutes he launched a reckless challenge on one of the Forest players, a challenge that these days would have seen him sent off. Then just 5 minutes later he savaged Forest player Gary Charles with a high footed challenge. It was Gascoigne who came off worse and he had to be stretchered off. Not only did this injury haunt him the following season but it was the catalyst for an injury plagued career.

Now the idea of over-arousal threatening careers is a bit over the top. This was a freak example. But it's very important for a footballer to keep his intensity under control. Intensity is important but too much of it can render a player ineffective.

To deal with too much intensity a player must SPOT the over-arousal first of all. Just like negative thinking awareness is the first step in change. Quite often awareness will come from an outside agency. Team mates or a coach might tell you to relax. And to be honest 'relax' is what you need to do. How? Simple! Slow everything down.

Slow down your movements, slow down your actions; take a little more time on the ball, stay disciplined by keeping your position.

The feeling of decreasing your intensity levels can be aided by saying 'Relax' to yourself and taking some deep breaths. It's a simple but very important technique.

Summary

- Intensity is your physical activity and mental alertness
- Playing at a high intensity for 90 minutes doesn't come naturally to some people
- Using the animal and head, shoulders technique can increase intensity
- Sometimes players play in a state of over-arousal
- Slow things down if over-arousal is a problem

Chapter 6

Managing Your Emotions

I have travelled across the world giving presentations to football teams and what always fascinates me most is the response to a question I often ask. The question is this: “Who here plays their best football when angry?”

I would say about 80% of the room raises their hand. Surprised? I was...at first.

But believe you me a lot of footballer play at their best when they are angry. Is this the same as you? Do you play great football when you're a little bit annoyed (or even very annoyed?)

The anger a player can feel can arise following an altercation with an opponent or perhaps from a disagreement with the referee. Or maybe its anger at a team mate for a period of poor play. It may also be anger at himself, for anger may arise from a few mistakes that a player personally has made.

So does anger really help? Does anger improve your performance? Well the answer is yes *and* no.

Let's pause to think about two players who have been known to have 'anger management issues' on the pitch: Roy Keane and Wayne Rooney in the English Premier League.

For both of these players anger is their best friend and their worst enemy. How is it their best friend? In fact their anger helps increase their feelings of physical intensity and mental alertness.

Anger helps a footballer increase feelings of physical intensity and mental alertness

In a state of anger a footballer can be quicker to the ball, more competitive in his challenges, stronger in the air, and can benefit from improved anticipation. Anger can sustain effort, magnify focus and deliver surges of adrenaline that improves performance all around.

Anger can deliver surges of adrenaline that improves performance all around

However this intensity is only useful if directed toward executing a player's role and responsibility. It's only useful if the intensity of anger is directed toward being more competitive.

It's only useful if the intensity of anger is directed toward being more competitive

Let's say that again because it gets to the heart of using anger correctly.

It's only useful if the intensity of anger is directed toward being more competitive

I remember watching an English Premier League (EPL) match a couple of years ago between Wigan Athletic and Arsenal. As supporters of the EPL will know Wigan were very much the underdogs. But after 80 minutes the Wigan team found themselves winning one nil and in the 81st minute they had a definite penalty turned down by the referee. Collectively they went mad. They were seething at the referee and quite a few of the players went to argue with the referee. However they didn't have time as Arsenal went straight on the attack and within a minute, with the entire Wigan defence at sea Arsenal equalised. An angry Wigan team were now seething with rage. They felt they should have had a penalty and a chance to make it two nil, but now it was one all. And I don't think I need to tell you what happened next. Within 5 minutes Arsenal scored to go 2-1 up and went onto win the game. To say controversy surrounded the last 10 minutes is an understatement but let's examine those last few minutes a little closer.

The Wigan players were very angry and had the kind of increased feelings of intensity that can so often be energising and can help their game. However, they chose to direct that intensity toward the referee and officials.

They chose to direct that intensity toward the referee and officials

They chose to direct that intensity toward arguing about what they deemed to be unfair. If however they had directed that intensity toward their role and responsibility they would have started playing even better than they had played in the previous 80 minutes.

If they had directed that intensity toward their role and responsibility they would have started playing even better

They could have used that intensity to build on their lead, work like crazy, and defend with strength and aggression. They would have given themselves the best opportunity to win.

Is directing your anger easy to do? Of course not! But it is ***essential***. If you want to be the best player you can be you have to use anger in the right way. You

have to use the intense feelings that accompany the emotion of anger to help energise you, to help make you quicker, livelier, more focused and more alert.

When you use your feelings of anger correctly you stop playing with anger and you start being competitive. You are no longer angry, you are competitive.

When you use your feelings of anger correctly you stop playing with anger and you start being competitive. You are no longer angry, you are competitive

SPOT/STOP/SHIFT

So we come back to our SPOT/STOP/SHIFT technique. Again the emphasis is on making the SPOT a habit. You must notice when you start to direct your anger incorrectly. This is a skill and like all other skills can be improved with practice. Once you have SPOTTED your feelings of anger you must STOP yourself from directing the anger toward things that won't help your game such as the referee. And finally you must SHIFT the direction of your anger toward executing your processes. This SHIFT means tightening your focus on your processes combined with using the intensity and energy you have built up on executing them even better than before. When you use the feelings of intensity you get from being angry it can be so powerful.

The Story of Batman

Let me give you a real world example here. I got to know a professional footballer called Shaun Batt a few seasons ago. Battsy as we called him was playing for a non league club at the time, a club called Fisher Athletic. He was a very quick winger, skilful and full of desire. In fact this desire could often spill over on the pitch. His will to win sometimes got the better of him and he could easily get far too angry at the referee or the opposition. As his intensity increased he would lunge in and make silly fouls and constantly complain at the referee. Naturally my thoughts as I got to know Battsy's habits and patterns were "Wow! If this guy directs his intensity into his script he will be one great player."

So we got to work. I told Battsy that I thought it was great he had so passion and desire to win but that he had to use his anger to become a better player. I told him he was at an advantage to players who failed to have the same kind of passion but that he must learn to become more disciplined in directing his anger. We started to watch footage of players getting angry and lashing out at the opposition or laying into the ref. He agreed that he often felt the same way and acted in the same manner. Importantly he understood that if he actually

used his angry feelings in the correct way he could see himself performing even better.

Battsy agreed to take action. We agreed a five point action plan:

1. Have an understanding that if he used his anger toward competitiveness he would advance his career quicker
2. He had to build his awareness of when he got angry. So he set a goal in training and in matches to SPOT when he started to feel angry.
3. We both agreed that when he SPOTTED himself feeling angry he would immediately move away from the situation. He decided the most appropriate response was to get back 'into position.'
4. He would then talk to himself in an energised and confident way. For example: "I'm angry. Let's use this anger to make myself quicker. This is pretty exciting. Stay focused and use this emotion I'm feeling."
5. He would strive to maintain his intense feelings but with an emphasis on making sure he directed his feelings toward executing his specific processes. He would get constant feedback from the coaching staff.

Battsy went to work on this straight away. Like any other skill a mental skill of this nature takes time to be develop. It took a few games and a few yellow cards for him to get used to using his anger effectively, but eventually he got the hang of it.

By the end of the season Battsy was attracting interest from bigger clubs and after a two year spell at Peterborough United FC he now plies his trade at Millwall FC in the English Championship.

Summary

- Many professional soccer players say they play best when they are angry
- Anger increases physical intensity and mental alertness
- Whether anger is useful depends on where the anger is directed
- Direct anger at irrelevant factors such as the referee then performance will get worse
- Direct anger toward processes then anger turns to competitiveness

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