

Training Tips : Psychology of Playing

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Sports psychology is concerned with enabling your mind to be more efficient and productive, and ultimately increasing the level of your performance. Remember that the mind controls the body just like the driver controls the car. Olympic gold medalists in all disciplines work with sports psychologists. Similarly, the practice has been adopted within the GAA and, though not always publicised, a number of successful county teams use sports psychologists. If you are still sceptical or think that all psychology relates to psychopaths or head-cases, try this visualisation exercise.

Part one

1. Stand with your feet together. Raise your right arm straight in front of you to shoulder height.
2. Tilt your head slightly to one side so as to look along the length of your arm.
3. Now, leaving your arm raised and without moving your feet, see how far you can turn your upper body around to the right.
4. Go as far as is comfortable, keep looking down on your arm and make a mental note of how far you have reached.
5. Return to face the front and lower your arm.

Part two

1. Do not physically move - stay still and close your eyes.
2. Imagine with your eyes closed that you are turning again in the same way. It doesn't matter how vividly you visualise it, just think about it.
3. Imagine it being easy and visualise yourself going much further.
4. See yourself going round only much easier than before. So easy you can push on past that point.
5. Tell your self you are going at least one metre further than your original point.
6. Pick your point that you are going to reach and focus on it for a few seconds.
7. Now you have passed it turn round and open your eyes

Part three

1. Now physically repeat the exercise
2. Don't put any more effort in than you did the first time
3. See how much further you go.

Now that you believe, the following articles are ranked in order of importance.

“Remember the greatest opponent you will over come will be when you are in complete control of your self”

Goal Setting

If we don't have a target, how can we measure the success we achieve? The technique of goal setting focuses your energy on what needs to be done. Goal setting is the most effective means of increasing performance in sport, sometimes generating improvements of up to 30%.

Goal setting follows a simple blueprint. Firstly, identify your aspiration or dream; it could be something like making the county team. Then, you need to set lots of small goals, which if reached along the way will contribute to you achieving your aspiration.

But before we set these goals, let's look at the different types of goals there are. Three types of goals are described below.

- Outcome goals depend on the outcome of a situation. It could be something like scoring four points in the next match you play. The problem with this goal is that you have limited control over it. Perhaps the other team is too strong and the ball only comes down to your side three times in the whole game. This is beyond your control and is therefore of no use when it comes to measuring your improvement.
- Performance goals are largely within your control. They may be about kicking or striking the ball off a wall and catching it 40 times inside a minute, or even just drinking the required amount of water. Whatever the target, these goals can be measured and it is only through personal responsibility that you will complete them.
- Process goals require you to identify how something will be achieved. A process goal is what we will do to achieve our aspiration, which means developing a 'prescription for success'. You have to sit down and design an action plan which you are going to put in place to help achieve your goal. (These are what the daily goals discussed later are for)

Goals should meet the following criteria

SMARTER

Specific: It must be specified exactly what is to be achieved.

Measurable: You must be able to measure your improvement.

Agreed: It should be agreed with yourself and your coach or

whoever else it involves.

Realistic: It should be achievable.

Timed: It should have a time limit or deadline.

Exciting: It should motivate you and be what you want to do.

Recorded: It should be recorded so that you can see your progress.

So, an example for your template for your goals might be as follows:

Aspiration: Make the county team.

(Bad example)

Yearly goal: Improve my level of football. – This goal is far too vague and doesn't comply with the SMARTER model.

(Good example)

Improve the following aspects of my game.

Seconds it takes to sprint 40yds.

My ability to score from the 45 in play.

This needs to be measured and completed within the year.

First monthly goal:

Sprint training – 40yards x 15 times for 20 sessions over the month.

Practice 4 sessions per week scoring from 45m – minimum of 300 kicks per session.

Daily goal:

Visualise kicking technique for 15 min.

Do sprint session – 15x40yd sprints.

KEY POINT: It is important that you keep your goals written somewhere visible or, even better, tell someone who will encourage you. You need to be reminded of your goal every day.

Once your daily goal is complete, tick it off and write in the next day's goals. Keep in mind that they should be something that will help you achieve your monthly goal. When you have achieved your monthly goal, write a new one for the next month keeping in mind your yearly goal.

What you achieve today affects what you achieve at the end of the month, and consequentially what you achieve each year. Once

you realise that this eventually determines whether or not you achieve your aspirations, you will then know that you live your life day by day. You just have to get today done right and you will have achieved a step towards your dream.

Performance Profiling

You are only as strong as your weakest link. This simple technique gets you to rate your qualities so you can work on what you've identified as a weak point. Write down the following headings and give yourself a score out of ten

Hydration 3/10
Nutrition 4/10
Speed 6/10
Flexibility 2/10
Strength 8/10
Rest 5/10
Skill 6/10

From my own scores we can see that hydration (water intake) and flexibility are the two weakest links. If I develop these for a month and then reassess myself, I will have made a bigger improvement than if I had just worked on my strength as it is already at a high level. This technique works well in conjunction with goal setting.

Routine Building

Routines allow us to become automated and focused on what we are about to do. One of the most famous routines is Johnny Wilkinson's when kicking the rugby ball. He stands with his hands clasped, then looks and visualises the flight of the ball picking the exact spot it's going to land.

Routine plays a very important part in focusing us to perform as it releases tension and calms us. To develop your routine, you first need a focusing cue. It doesn't need to be a rain dance, it could just be as simple as squeezing the ball before you set up the free or

sideline. Write down your routine, know it inside out, and practice it every time. Try to make it as simple as possible and remember it's about how it focuses your mind on the task at hand, not about how fancy or noticeable it is. Sport performance is always about function not fashion.

Building in game concentration

Building concentration in your game.

During a match there are many different things to distract you - supporters, linesmen, referees, opposition players, and even your own team mates.

Players often argue with their own team-mates and the referee, or get involved with other players. All these are distractions and use up your concentration. You can only concentrate on a limited amount at a time and so you are lessening your focus on the game. You cannot control the referee or other players and you are just wasting time if you let them become part of your game. You should only focus on yourself – you are inside your control.

Focus your attention on the ball and make yourself aware of players' positions around you. Nothing else matters in the game other than how you move and react to the play.

Don't dwell on mistakes. If you miss the ball or make a mess of things, there is nothing to be gained from thinking about it, which also robs you of your concentration – just be ready for the next ball.

What is stress? Our favourite explanation is: Pick up a pencil hold it straight out in front of you at arms length. It's easy and you could hold it there for a while, but you couldn't hold it for a day. Stress is like the pencil - the longer we hold onto it and focus on it the more difficult it becomes.

It's important to identify stress and deal with it appropriately.

Everyone has issues to deal with ranging from family and relationship difficulties to money or work problems. The key is to develop a method for leaving stress in the changing room.

One technique is to touch something like the bottom of your training bag and to imagine all your stress and problems being absorbed by the bag, leaving you with a clear mind to focus on the task at hand. When you come back in, you can reabsorb the thoughts and get back to working them out.

Visualisation

Visualisation is a very powerful technique used to provide the relaxation and confidence necessary for skill building. Firstly, the technique. It's best if you lie or sit in a quiet place where you will be undisturbed. Concentrate on deep breathing until you are relaxed. Picture a vision of you achieving what you are aiming to achieve. Then add in the smells and sounds and feelings. Keep running through the scene making it more and more vivid.

You should be viewing it in the first person (through your own eyes) and also at real time speed. It will take practice before you become very effective but it's well worth doing for 15 minutes, three or four times a week.

Uses: This technique improves your skills through repeated visualisations of you performing them. It can be used to visualise what you are going to do in the upcoming match but it also is beneficial to relive successful past performances and great bits of play in order to build up your confidence.

Tips: As you have experienced, your body follows your mind so only visualise positive events and positive performances. Be positive about everything and give yourself a solid message. Don't say "I can't miss" as your body might just hear "I miss". The appropriate way would be to say "I can score, I am going to score". A good exercise is to listen to other people talking and try to pick out an underlying positive or negative message. EG "How are you?" Ans; "Not bad" or "I'm good, happy etc"