

Mental Preparation in Final Hours Before the Aussie Rules Game

Introduction

Elite footballers will follow a structured program of activities in the final hours leading up to their game. This structure will be developed and administered by the coach and become a routine pattern of activity preceding each and every game. To a large degree, this structure is in place to achieve appropriate and effective physical and tactical preparation. For example, each and every player needs to have eaten appropriately and be adequately hydrated well in advance of their game and the coach also needs adequate time to fine tune and review team tactics for the imminent match.

Nonetheless, the mental preparation for each athlete will be largely an individual experience. While experienced coaches will allow their players adequate time to mentally prepare for the imminent contest, how the player mentally prepares may be left mainly at the discretion of the player himself. As a consequence, it becomes the responsibility of each individual player to get himself mentally ready before each game.

Yet an astute coach knows that many of his players will need instruction in how best to mentally prepare for a game of football at the elite level. This assistance applies especially to young footballers or others who have not experienced an elite program before. Many coaches will have learned these techniques themselves from their own playing days, especially those who have played professionally. However, the football coach in charge of 22-24 athletes on game day is aware that each and every player may require their own unique method to achieve their optimal mental preparation. With this in mind, the coach will need to prepare well in advance, to educate, support and tune each of their charge's mental preparation.

The notes below and the supporting literature addresses some of the factors that the coach needs to understand and accommodate as he works to achieve the optimum mental preparation for his team each week.

Mental preparation – general considerations

- Personality** Two basic assumptions that underpin personality:
1. People behave (think, feel and act) differently – what works for one person may not work for another;
 2. People behave consistently across a range of settings – on-going routine for each individual will be beneficial.

The coach needs to be aware of the consequences of 'social desirability' behaviour pre-game whereby some individuals, particularly rookies or less secure people, may feel the need to act in what they consider to be the expected manner, rather than what is best for them. As well, some personality types may be more prone to be distracted or intimidated by less familiar surroundings or adverse match conditions and this may need to be monitored or if known in advance, treated in an appropriate way.

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- Mood and emotion** See p.52 model (Morris and Summers, 2004). Performance consequences of pre-competition depression. Research predicts compromised performance due to increased anger, tension, confusion and fatigue and reduced vigour. Be aware for players known to be under-going some hardship or sadness / loss / grief etc.
- Effect of music, diet and exercise on mood. By and large positive, provided each is appropriate to the circumstances (eg. relaxing or energising music, dependent on person's arousal level, food as energy and hydration including electrolytes, and warm-up).
- Be wary of pre-match competitive exercise or contests as losing can have a negative impact on mood for some individuals.
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Anxiety	<p>Cognitive (eg. worrying, intrusive thoughts) and somatic (nervousness, nausea, sweating, increased heart rate etc) anxiety.</p> <p>Intensity (low to high) and direction (positive or negative influence).</p> <p>Avoidance (remove self from source of anxiety) and approach (confront, accept and conquer it) strategies.</p> <p>Systematic approaches and practice in advance to deal with anxiety, rather than expect relief via a documented or modelled procedure on the day. For some treatments, need to understand a hierarchy of anxiety provoking scenarios. Various techniques include flooding, systematic desensitisation, cognitive restructuring, self-instructional training, coping skills and stress inoculation.</p>
Motivation	<p>The role of intrinsic (within self, not via external – extrinsic – sources) motivation to optimise pre-game preparation.</p> <p>Alternatively, use of extrinsic sources of motivation might prove to be counter-productive or even anxiety inducing. For example, ‘let’s do it for Jack who passed away’ or ‘we owe this to our supporters’ do not always achieve the desired outcome.</p> <p>Self-determination theory (SDT). A nice reference at http://selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory/</p>
Confidence and Self Talk	<p>Influence of previous experience (accomplishments or failures) of self and others. Intrinsic motivation is usually a more robust source of on-going confidence.</p> <p>Verbal persuasion (talk it up, express confidence in athletes to do the job). Only positive reinforcement and use of cue (play hard, concentrate, work, effort, switch on, etc) words.</p>
Team cohesion	<p>Task (degree to which team works together to achieve specific tasks eg. backing up in defence) and social (degree to which members like each other and enjoy each other’s company) cohesion.</p> <p>The extent to which pre-match behaviour of the individual influences both task and social cohesion during the game is worthy of consideration. Does it and how would you know? How does the coach set these behaviours up pre-match, and therefore what emphasis, or otherwise, is placed on individual differences and flexibility?</p>
Imagery and Mental routines	<p>Image previously successful performances and use to consolidate positive thoughts for imminent match. Assist with stress management and relaxation. Need specific training and practice in advance.</p> <p>Practise discrete aspects of the game via imagery and rehearse these actions mentally. For example, set shot kicking for goal – taking time to execute routine and imaging successful outcome.</p>
Dealing with failure	<p>Ensure previous failures or unsatisfactory performances are now parked away and not replayed as part of pre-match preparation. These should have been debriefed many days ago and best not to even mention these as this brings them back to the conscious level. Instead, see the notes regarding Awareness, the being in the Present and Mindfulness.</p>
Attuning	<p>To the environment, to the opponent, to your team-mates, to yourself, to your objectives and to your strategy. Getting used to and accepting the environment, not being threatened by it.</p>
Concentration	<p>The importance of focussing on the right thing at the right time. Refer Nideffer model. Practise to develop disciplines and appropriate concentration. Self-talk, switching on and off, parking thoughts, distraction training, centring, controlling the controllables, being in the present.</p>
Simulations	<p>Practise pre-game routines as often and when practical. Ensure this is the case with practice matches.</p> <p>How often do you practise your half-time or three-quarter time? What else can be practised via simulation before game-day?</p> <p>What should you not simulate on game day, at the risk of over-burdening players or unnecessarily raising anxiety levels?</p>
Standardising routines	<p>Once they are defined, refined and clearly understood, maintain a standard approach on-going. Be predictable for home and away games and keep as consistent as this as practical for finals. Yet at the individual level, intervention may be required, at least early in the season.</p>

Journal	<p>Document experience pre-game and use as a means to fine-tune future behaviour and preparation, in light of the subsequent performance achieved each week.</p> <p>This journal or work-book applies to both coach and players. For players, do not need to be heavy handed but encourage participation by highlighting the benefits. In time, players can establish an association between their own mental and physical preparation and their own performance and adjust accordingly to achieve improved outcomes. Self-monitoring leads to self-regulation.</p>
Awareness	<p>Be aware of what needs to be done (the process), as opposed to focussing on the desired outcome (winning). Refer Ken Ravizza, Chapter 12 in J. M. Williams (Ed.), Applied Sport Psychology: Personal Growth to Peak Performance (3rd ed., pp. 171- 181).</p> <p>Ken talks a great deal about being in the present and as a consequence, being able to achieve the best performance. This is consistent with the more recent emphasis on mindfulness – see below.</p>
Arousal	<p>Relaxation and Energising Techniques for Regulation of Arousal. Williams, J. M., & Harris, D. V. (1998). Relaxation and energizing techniques for regulation of arousal. In J. M. Williams (Ed.), Applied Sport Psychology: Personal Growth to Peak Performance (3rd ed., pp. 219-236.). Mountain, View: California: Mayfield Publishing Company.</p> <p>A good reference to photocopy and examine. Deals with tension control and relaxation techniques including breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, meditation, visualisation. Also techniques to energise using breathing, imagery, verbal cues, music, pacing, distracting and more.</p>
Mindfulness	<p>See various references and new perspective. Consider.</p> <p>“Enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality”</p> <p>serves as an important self-regulatory function</p> <p>mindfulness is openly experiencing what is there</p> <p>accepting anxiety and moving on, so the anxiety goes away</p>
Final Hour	<p>Coach – player interaction reference. Note individual differences and consequences.</p>

What does it all mean?

Being mentally prepared is a complex business and for the coach, the complexity includes himself, his assistants, other support staff, and importantly, the players.

In theory, if the previous week’s preparation has been sound and structured, the pre-game preparation should flow. However, that assumes that the game-day flows without incident and each player has taken responsibility to prepare themselves as directed by the coaching staff. In practice, the incumbent mental skills of the coach and his players will allow them to cope with and adapt to the unexpected.

So, pre-game mental preparation is not something that can be attended to on the day like first aid. Instead, it needs to be taught, practised, tuned and reviewed from season start to season’s end. Many of the factors in need of attention are noted above although this is not an extensive list.

Finally, mental preparation for these footballers needs to be developed in accordance with the unique characteristics of the game of Australian Rules football. Therefore, many of the theoretical aspects discussed above need to be integrated with the conventional wisdom acquired through playing and coaching this game at the highest and most demanding level.