

Introduction

- Invasion sports. Where two teams share the same playing space and compete for possession of a ball (or similar), with the aim of 'scoring' at their opponent's defensive 'goal'. This includes such games as football, soccer, rugby, basketball, hockey, etc.
- Key focus: Mental skills affecting Decision Making (DM).
- An elite and developmental focus. That is, until fundamental motor skills are in place, mental skills may not warrant the same attention (but later they certainly do, if performance excellence is the targeted outcome). Also, young people's cognitive capacities develop after many of the motor skills are quite advanced, so natural maturation is necessary before we can expect high levels of decision making ability.
- Practical mental skills tips. For training, and game day (including preparation and post-game).

Optimised Decision Making in Team Sports

Working Definition

Clarity of mind to facilitate the best choice among options (task / skill execution), while under competitive pressure

Context – physical, technical, tactical, technology, advanced levels

Key Messages.

1. Under pressure, Decision Making deteriorates.
2. Ways to overcome such performance decrements – develop adaptive habits, at training, and in games, "just another game" mentality; a focus on personal best always, pursuit of excellence (each of these emphases are overlapping and relate to mental skills discussed below).
3. Learn / Teach: Life experience (sampling different sports and leisure activities, and related motor skills); coaching / deliberate play; mental skills acquisition and optimisation

Mental Skills – arousal and anxiety management (emotional regulation), motivation, confidence, attention. Together, each will influence decision making ability under pressure. So, to improve Decision Making, improve mental skills.

Arousal

Wakefulness, alertness, consequences for DM (thought, perception) and motor skills execution. Evaluation → anxiety.

Difference between introverts and extroverts. Variations throughout games, also fluctuations in accordance with time of day, and events of the day / game.

Tip: Learn to Monitor, gain Awareness (of optimal arousal zone for self), then regulate for best performance. Astute coach to assist juniors with this.

Anxiety

With arousal. Cognitive (thoughts, beliefs) and Somatic (physical i.e. nervousness, sweating, heart rate up). Major issue in all sports, for most athletes and coaches, and in life. Many performance consequences. Choking.

Tip: Normalise anxiety with all athletes, treat with acceptance, mindfulness techniques. “Congratulations, you are human, sounds like you are ready to play, that’s cool”, etc.

Motivation

Intrinsic (task / process focused, personal mastery, pursuit of excellence) – internal to self.

Extrinsic (ego, outcome focused, in comparison with others, win/lose considerations) – external (fame, fortune, popularity, power, etc). Kicks in more with age, and coach, parents, peer influence. Can lead to maladaptive behaviours, when perceived competence is lower.

Self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others (social factors). The theory says that everyone strives for independent choice (eg. choose the sport they want to play), they want to be recognised as competent in the things they do, and they seek positive and reinforcing relationships with significant others (eg. peer group). Primary needs for each individual. Consider as a coach, in everything you do.

Hint: Encourage focus on task execution and success, not win / lose. Establish an environment so every athlete can succeed (even if the team is losing!) and enjoy what they are doing and learning.

Attention

Concentration. Focused. Central vision largely. A narrowing of attention, like with stop play shots on goal or catching.

Selective attention. Ignoring distractions (eg. crowd noise, poor umpiring decisions, sledging, anxiety, other) while focusing on the task at hand. Exercise choice.

Divided attention. Mental time-sharing. Like loose man-in-defence mapping where team-mates and opponents are, or designated kicker selecting a target in among a zone setup for the kick-out. A broadening of attention.

All vital aspects under pressure, and for good decision making. The right attention (focusing on the right thing) at the right time.

Hint: Demand good concentration from all athletes, starting at training, and in every game. Eg. One person talking at a time, “eyes in guys”. Look and see, listen and hear, hear and understand, understand and execute, etc. “We need to learn to concentrate guys, practice starts now”.

Enhancing each mental skill

Arousal – routines, accommodating individual differences, intervention



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Mental skills training for team sports

Anxiety – acceptance, normalise, process solution (attention, support, routines), relaxation, meditation, imagery

Motivation – environmental, parent / coaches, personality, philosophical

Attention – factored into every practice session and drill, demand it

Confidence – provide the means for each athlete to succeed, be process focused, encourage positive self-talk (and team-talk) only

Teaching Decision Making

Understand. Game play. Letting Go. Non-Punitive. Assessment. Reflect.

Enhance each of the related mental skills.

Consider imagery – another topic.

Decision Making Context Diagram

