

Mental Toughness (MT) for AFL Footballers

The Question

As asked by senior AFL coach in April 2006.

How many mentally brittle players can you afford in a football team?

Or more specifically, in consideration of the various roles and setups (defenders, mid-field / runners, bigs and forwards), how many mentally brittle players can you carry in a team?

Considerations and Assumptions

- ♣ We can assume that players are mentally tough because they play football – that is not necessarily the case.
- ♣ Mental toughness is a continuum, it is not a dichotomy i.e. some people are less MT, some are more MT.
- ♣ MT can oscillate. Sometimes a person might be more so, sometimes less so. There is variation within people across time, just as there is variation among people.
- ♣ So why the differences? Within and between? How can we get heightened consistency at the individual level, and increase MT to satisfactory levels for certain individuals?
- ♣ Context specific factors. On a losing or winning streak or breaking even. Individual performance and expectations of others and self. Stressors and coping strategies.
- ♣ During game context. Opponent, state of play, individual performance, coach feedback, interaction with and support from team-mates.

Other Considerations

self efficacy	<p>Level of confidence individuals have in their ability to execute courses of action or attain specific performance outcomes.</p> <p>Self efficacy judgements derive from the cognitive processing of information from four principle sources:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. performance accomplishments 2. vicarious experiences (observing others or other situations) 3. verbal persuasion (positive self-talk) 4. emotional arousal <p>It is the cognitive appraisal process that is salient, not the information only. Related to this is the role of self esteem in the appraisal process.</p>
achievement orientation	<p>task (process) versus ego (outcome) driven individuals</p> <p>effort and personal mastery (intrinsic) versus reward and positive social evaluation (extrinsic motivation)</p>

Mental Toughness Defined

Graham Jones (2002)

Mental toughness is having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to:

- ♣ Generally, cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, lifestyle) that sport places on a performer;
- ♣ Specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure.

Mental Toughness Attributes – Rank Ordered (Jones, 2002)

Ranking	Attributes
1.	Having an unshakeable self-belief in your ability to achieve your competition goals
2.	Bouncing back from performance set-backs as a result of increased determination to succeed
3.	Having an unshakeable self-belief that you possess unique qualities and abilities that make you better than your opponents.
4.	Having an insatiable desire and internalised motives to succeed.
5.	Remaining fully focussed on the task at hand in the face of competition specific distractions
6.	Regaining psychological control following unexpected, uncontrollable events
7.	Pushing back the boundaries of physical and emotional pain, while still maintaining techniques and effort under distress (in training and competition)
8.	Accepting that competition anxiety is inevitable and knowing that you can cope with it
9.	Not being adversely affected by others' good and bad performances
10.	Thriving on the pressure of competition
11.	Remaining fully focussed in the face of personal life distractions
12.	Switching a sport focus on and off as required

Consequences – Without and with MT

Mentally brittle	Mentally strong
less competitive, successful or confident	more competitive, successful or confident
less team cohesion	more team cohesion
less effort and more short cuts	more effort and less short cuts
opponent grows in confidence	opponent's confidence may be compromised
less persistence	more persistence
contagious / damaging effect on team-mates	inspirational effect on team-mates
negative thoughts and low self esteem	positive thoughts and heightened self esteem
downward spiral	maintenance of confidence and commitment
lack of respect	earned respect

Mentally brittle	Mentally strong
the fear factor	the courage factor
selfishness and laziness	team commitment and effort
lack of personal pride	intrinsic motivation
ego involvement	task involvement
being distracted	being focussed
reactive and risk averse	proactive and instinctive
doubtful, not fully committed, expect the worse and accept when it happens, contaminant for team-mates	Having an unshakeable self-belief in your ability to achieve your competition goals
Give up, lack persistence, leave it to others, require external assistance, seek medication approach, believe in bad luck, blame others	Bouncing back from performance set-backs as a result of increased determination to succeed
I am unfortunate and not as lucky as some	Having an unshakeable self-belief that you possess unique qualities and abilities that make you better than your opponents.
Doing it for others, for reward, for recognition	Having an insatiable desire and internalised motives to succeed.
Easily distracted, blaming other factors, not taking personal responsibility	Remaining fully focussed on the task at hand in the face of competition specific distractions
Clocking off when it gets too hard, “not my day”, ceasing effort and interest when the game is lost	Regaining psychological control following unexpected, uncontrollable events
Downward spiral and performance decrements and accepting that this is unavoidable given the prevailing circumstances	Pushing back the boundaries of physical and emotional pain, while still maintaining techniques and effort under distress (in training and competition)
Quitting when it gets hard, choking	Accepting that competition anxiety is inevitable and knowing that you can cope with it
Not sufficiently focussed (accepting distractions) or not sufficiently committed to best effort, only effort better than opponent	Not being adversely affected by others’ good and bad performances
A fair-weather athlete, wants recognition and reward but less inclined to earn it, not prepared to accept the need for hard-work to achieve	Thriving on the pressure of competition
Unable to switch on / off and bringing life’s baggage to the sporting arena	Remaining fully focussed in the face of personal life distractions
No sufficiently balanced in interests other than sport, too invested in their identity as an athlete, where winning defines their self-worth	Switching a sport focus on and off as required

The Answer

Question: How many mentally brittle players can you afford in a football team. Or more specifically, in consideration of the various roles and setups (defenders, mid-field / runners, bigs and forwards), how many mentally brittle players can you carry in a team?

Ideal World	None
Real World	<p>As few as possible.</p> <p>May tolerate some providing they possess other valued skills such as endurance, speed or skill. Perhaps some less MT individuals may contribute in other ways including their humour, their intelligence or tactical ability.</p> <p>However, as the team and competition becomes more elite, the number of mentally weak individuals should approach zero. Just like the SAS or SOG groups, there is no room for mentally weak individuals at the absolute pinnacle of any profession.</p> <p>Yet in sub-elite competition, compromises are made and inevitably, some players will be employed / recruited who are less mentally tough than desired.</p>

By Role	<p>Defenders. No room and should not place the mentally questionable players there, unless there is scope to enhance this toughness by exposing individuals to this pressure.</p> <p>Mid-fielders. Some scope to accommodate less MT players among this group provided they are fast, fit and skilful, and can link the play. Yet even if they cannot get the in-and-under ball, they must be able to chase, tackle and keep the ball contained when there is a pack.</p> <p>Bigs. Ideally your bigs are MT yet the reality is that sometimes you take the height and the relative brittleness as unfortunate reality, in some cases, especially the lanky types. Conversely, a group of MT bigs will take your team a long way, as they allow the smalls to feel more protected, and be more bold.</p> <p>Forwards. Key targets must be MT, to match up with hard defenders, keep the ball in their scoring zone, and ensure contests to create opportunities for their crumbers. They must also be prepared to chase and match up when there are turnovers or kick-outs else their own mid-field and defenders will be overwhelmed. Maybe you can tolerate a crumber who is less MT as long as they too contribute like the outside players in the mid-field with other aspects of their game.</p>
Action	<p>Coaches must work to condition mental weakness out of their team. They do this not by demanding it but via the creation of an environment which encourages a heightened level of MT.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♣ Identify those behaviours that confirm the MT of a footballer, and recruit players that exhibit those behaviours. ♣ Recruit and retain coaching and support staff who model MT. Ensure your recruitment officers are clear what MT is – see above. ♣ Create a training and club environment that believes in its capacity to succeed and ability to deal with adversity, with an on-going focus on continuous improvement. ♣ With player development, encourage personal mastery and effort, less on reward and punishment. ♣ Continuously articulate messages regarding your belief that the team will succeed and individuals will improve. <p>At the individual level, the coach needs to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♣ understand their players, especially what motivates them to play, and when they do, what creates anxiety; ♣ support them in their quest to become more mentally tough; ♣ recognise that not everyone has the same physical tools; ♣ recognise that people have lives outside football and sport; ♣ be aware that MT will wax and wane depending on motivation and context; ♣ ask and clarify before you accuse and judge; ♣ be mindful of the contribution team cohesion plays;

- | | |
|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">♣ be aware that clear minds and relaxed bodies will assist the quest for MT;♣ do not give up on the player, unless they give up on themselves. |
|--|---|