

Football, psychology and performance

Australian football is an exciting game that demands a great deal from its participants. Not only must an Australian footballer be exceedingly fit, strong, agile, skilful, team orientated and courageous to succeed at this sport, the true champions also have superior mental skills. In time, the aspiring athlete realises there is so much more required to succeed at this game. Extra effort is required to develop a person's mental skills and this is where sport psychology can play a role, working with both individual athletes and coaches alike.

Sport psychology deals with both mental skills as well as less sport specific difficulties such as depression, anxiety, anger, grief and so on. Regardless, most people require psychological stability and positive mental health if they are to perform at their best in sport. This is especially so in Australian football where the athlete needs to be focused, determined and confident to succeed. Accordingly, when the athlete has both strong mental skills and is psychologically healthy the chances of performing at their best are increased.

Mental skills of importance to footballers include arousal and anxiety management, attention and concentration and the development and retention of confidence. Complementary skills to each of these include motivation, goal-setting, decision-making, communications and leadership. The means to achieve and sustain these mental skills include relaxation and mindfulness techniques, imagery, self-talk and set-task routines.

In a practical sense, these mental skills can be applied in many ways in football, during training, before, during and after games, and in daily life. For example, confidence relates to having a belief in our ability to succeed. Some people attribute success to luck. However, champions know 'luck is when preparation meets opportunity'. Believe (be confident) in yourself and your team-mates and you *will* prepare well and be ready to respond positively when the moment to act arises in a game.

If an athlete is lacking in confidence, then we need to examine the underlying beliefs and thoughts about themselves, and when we do, we often find the existence of negative self-talk, anxiety, ambivalent support (or unreasonably high expectations) from significant others, including parents. The good news is that 'thoughts are not facts' and beliefs can be modified, and so confidence can be enhanced, whether a team is winning or not.

Attention in football is fundamental to success. One substantial aspect of mental toughness is maintaining attention throughout a game. Therefore, it is important that athletes striving for success develop strong attention skills. However, since it is not possible to concentrate for long periods of time without a break, a champion athlete learns to switch on and off as required, to have small mental breaks at appropriate times, so ensuring that they are 'switched on' when they need to be. Further, in a game like Australian football, it is necessary to learn the skills of divided attention (eg. between team-mates and opposition, defence or offence, etc) or selective attention (eg. the right thing at the right time, or not be distracted at inopportune moments). Attention needs to be practised, requires motivation, self-talk, mindfulness and more. Nevertheless, it can be taught, and so learned.

Arousal and anxiety management are two other important mental skills required for the game of Australian football. While anxiety is normal in both life and in football, often anxiety becomes a source of distraction for footballers and if its' presence is evaluated negatively, an athlete may suffer compromised performance. Cognitive anxiety includes worry and can

undermine confidence and decision making while somatic (physical) anxiety can affect the execution of fine and gross motor skills including goal and field kicking and hand-balling.

Some people are more naturally anxious than others and so we consider it as part of their personality. For example, shy or introverted people tend to be more anxious. Yet the good news is that shy, introverted and anxious people can succeed at football as well as anyone, they just need to manage their anxiety and the heightened arousal that often accompanies that. Treatment of anxiety for athletes includes relaxation and mindfulness techniques, positive self-talk, imagery, cognitive therapy and shifting our competitive attention from what can be considered 'ego-focused' (being self-conscious) to 'task-focused' always.

So that is a brief introduction to sport psychology.

If you want to be a champion, or at least achieve your personal best, you will need to work on your skills, your strength, agility and fitness, learn about tactics and nutrition, and optimise your mental skills. Meantime, to learn more about some of the topics noted here and others, see further detail on my web-site at www.gmt-psychology.com. Or feel free to talk to call me (0400 177 671) or e-mail me for more information at ptrask@gmt-psychology.com.

And remember:

If you think you can, or if you think you can't, you're probably right.

Great works are performed not by strength but by perseverance.

When you stop being better you stop being good.

The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary.

If you continue to do what you have always done, you will continue to get what you have always got.

Ain't no chance if you don't take it.

It's so hard when I have to, and so easy when I want to.

A wise person will make more opportunities than they find.