

Mental Preparation in Final Hours Before Important Competitive Game

Introduction

Elite players (eg, footballers, basketballers) 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 athlete. As a consequence, it becomes the responsibility of each individual player to be mentally ready before each game.

Yet an astute coach knows that many of their players will need instruction in how best to mentally prepare for a game at the elite level. This assistance applies especially to young players 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 coach in charge of numerous 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 address some of the most crucial factors that the coach needs to understand and accommodate as he or she works to achieve the optimum mental preparation for their team and their athletes each week.

Personality

Two basic assumptions that underpin personality, and performance:

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 – ongoing and tailored routines for each individual will be beneficial.

Further, 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, managed in an appropriate way.

Anxiety

Some people are naturally anxious individuals, so will tend to be affected by anxiety in many situations, including competitive sport. Often such people are introverted and seek their own space before a game so they can calm their thoughts and physical nervousness. Other individuals might only get nervous in certain circumstances, often because they perceive it to be important, to their identity, or because they are experiencing pressure to perform from other sources (eg. a parent, a coach, scouts, the media, etc).

Nevertheless, the generally accepted wisdom is that a little bit of anxiety is positive before competition, if only to focus a person's attention, and assist their motivation. This anxiety can be considered in terms of the two types mentioned above, being cognitive (eg. worrying, intrusive thoughts) and somatic (nervousness, nausea, sweating, increased heart rate etc) anxiety. Further, the intensity of anxiety can be anywhere on the range from low to high, and be evaluated by the individual as either positive or negative.

Strategies used to deal with anxiety include **Avoidance** (remove self from source of anxiety) or **Approach** (confront, accept and conquer it) techniques. The second technique is the favoured model, although sometime avoidance (eg. not focusing on an opponent's sledging or questioning a referee's call) can be the recommended tactic in specific circumstances.

For some anxiety treatments, the coach will need to understand a hierarchy of anxiety provoking scenarios affecting individuals or the team. Various intervention techniques include flooding, systematic desensitisation, cognitive restructuring, relaxation and breathing techniques, mindfulness meditation, self-instructional training, coping skills and stress inoculation. Importantly, coaches need to work with their athletes in systematic ways and practice these methods

in advance of games and over the course of the season. Expecting to deal with anxiety in an ad-hoc and unplanned way any given week is likely to produce a counter-productive outcome.

Arousal

Arousal is the level of activity of various physiological indicators in the body, such as heart rate, respiration rate, galvanic skin response (sweating), brain wave activity, etc. Arousal is a continuum from sleep through heightened wakefulness and attentiveness. High levels may result in strong emotions such as joy, exhilaration, anxiety, panic, anger or rage. So, arousal can be a positive or negative experience at increased levels.

In football, under-arousal will often be seen as lack of energy and concentration on defence, poor foot work, slow to respond, lack of help or recovery etc. “We’re asleep on our defensive game guys”, says the coach. Offensively, you will have less time and space, or get caught in tackles more often, due to sluggish execution. Over-arousal may often result in too many free-kicks in defence, being too eager, or complaining about umpires as the athlete may be trying too hard, and not just flowing. Offensively, goal kicking percentages will be down for over-aroused athletes. In particular, set-shot goal kicking percentages will be down too, as this type of goal kicking (in addition to the gross motor skills) relies on fine-motor skill execution requiring less tension, and a more relaxed and flexible / agile body to get into the rhythm of set-shot kicking.

Arousal can also be called activation, or energising, or just getting “ready to play”. Various treatment techniques can be used for this including breathing, imagery, verbal cues, music, pacing, distracting and more.

Arousal and Anxiety

Arousal goes hand-in-hand with anxiety, with anxiety as the symptom of how an individual perceives their arousal. Over arousal tends to occur among anxious (and introverted athletes), while under-arousal among extroverts. The challenge for each athlete is to achieve their appropriate level of arousal pre-game, and so be ‘ready to play’ at their optimum level as soon as they enter the game. This will require that athlete to deal with both arousal and anxiety equally.

An athlete may worry about their nervousness pre-game, or become preoccupied with other thoughts, including the expectation of parents, the coach, the crowd, or others. In turn, this can increase arousal levels beyond the individual’s optimum range, and so performance is below that person’s best.

Somatic anxiety will tend to be aligned with over-arousal and its performance symptoms, as above. Conversely, cognitive anxiety will affect an athlete’s decision making, they will be tentative, communicate poorly (not enough, or inappropriately), not take on-board the coach’s instructions (they may listen but do not hear or understand because of other distracting thoughts / worries), and be less adaptive as the game unfolds.

For many athletes, arousal and anxiety tend to move toward optimum levels as they settle into the game. However, there is not always ‘settling in’ time available to athletes (eg. in football if they are messing up, they may get interchanged), hence the need to be ready from the start. Further, during this settling in period, the opposition may have already achieved a substantial lead, thus being a scenario where “the game was lost in the warm-up”. So the cure is to undertake an appropriate mental preparation.

Furthermore, the opposite can also be true in a game, where a team starts well and finishes badly. This could be because arousal and anxiety levels move into the non-optimum range as the game progresses, perhaps because of what occurs in that game eg. injury, harassing defence, poor umpiring, an agitated coach, etc. Of course, if the coach knows his or her players and their personalities, they can ‘read’ these signs, and respond accordingly. So too team mates. If not, then a bad situation can get worse, and ‘choking’ can occur. “They didn’t win the game, we lost it”.

What does it all mean?

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

In theory, if the previous week of 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 their 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. Some mental skills factors in need of attention are noted above. There are also other considerations but personality, arousal and anxiety factors are a good place to start.

Finally, mental preparation for specific team sports needs to be developed in accordance with the unique characteristics of that game. Therefore, many of the theoretical aspects discussed above need to be integrated with the conventional wisdom acquired through playing and coaching that game at the highest and most demanding level.

For further information, consult the sports psychology literature, or speak to a performance psychologist.

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