



## **PSYCHOLOGY: motivation; anxiety; confidence; goal-setting**

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### **MOTIVATION**

#### **Introduction**

In soccer, nothing can affect performance as dramatically as a sudden loss of motivation. Without the motivation to succeed a player cannot survive the challenges soccer can throw up. If the team or player is going through a bad patch then motivating your players becomes especially important. However, an overly motivated player may be nervous and take risks. This article attempts to look at motivation and suggest ways to help improve the motivational capacities of players.

#### **The Motivational Process**

In general we distinguish between, personal self-motivation (*intrinsic*) and motivation from the outside (*extrinsic*) by the coach, teammates, friends etc. By looking at the process of motivation, we can see how this influences performance. Human beings are motivated to do sport for several reasons;

A need to move & to play - to be active, expend excess energy & aggression, for self-fulfillment, to take risks, to satisfy curiosity, make use of the hunting and adventurous spirit...

Ambition & Recognition - various motives are ambition (win competitions), outside recognition (from fans, family, teammates...), playing in front of an audience, sociability and social standing...

Overall, the motives and needs of players are guided by two basic factors, the hope of success and fear of failure with experience generally showing that the former plays the major role in motivating players.

Every player has a dream in soccer and some players pursue their dreams and expect to achieve them through renewed hard work and dedication. Obstacles are seen as a challenge and each setback as a call for more effort to improve and overcome these problems. This type of player is *intrinsically* self-motivated as their desire to succeed comes from within themselves.

However, many players, often technically and physically good enough to succeed, fall by the wayside due to a lack of self-belief to fulfill their dreams or the willingness to spend the necessary time on the pitch or in the gym.

Generally, it is easier to work with highly motivated players as they only need decent objectives, the environment and ability to concentrate as well as good technical, tactical and physical coaching. However, these players still need to be looked after as they may become frustrated and bored if they do not meet their goals or keep their performances up to expected standards.

For players who are under motivated, the coach needs firstly to convince and motivate these athletes to believe they can succeed and secondly that only hard work will lead to success.

### **Motivating The Team/Player**

There is no perfect method for motivating players as this changes from individual to individual and can depend on the current situation, such as the team's position in the league.. The following points suggest various ways to help motivate and sustain motivation in your players:

Balanced & interesting training - a disorganized and unbalanced training session can demotivate players from giving their best. Plan well ahead and cater for the individual groups' and team's needs. Remember variety is the spice of life! Training should be both mentally and physically stimulating. For players who are often substitutes, keeping them motivated is difficult. Try for example to have a weekly game in which the head coach works solely with the substitutes and an assistant coach works with the first-team but don't at any time put distance between the players.

Setting objectives (Goal setting) - is useful as it allows players to have something to aim at through a predefined plan to compare their progress at different steps over a period of time. However, the effects of motivation depends on how attractive the goal is. Also objectives that are too easy will lead to players being either overconfident and careless or if too difficult, players will approach them with low confidence and hesitancy. Try developing a goal setting plan with daily, medium and long-term goals.

Be enthusiastic, positive, honest and supportive: Your enthusiasm and positivity will rub off on players. Mention the positive actions rather than the negative actions as often as possible. Be honest about performance and be firm when making a point about areas that need improvement. Offer suggestions on how to improve. Do not embarrass your players but do tell them what you think!

Encouragement - encourage fun and hard work in the training or competition. Always encourage players when they are successful and unsuccessful and avoid complacency.

Be supportive, confident and respectful - remind them that they win as a team and lose as a team.. Always be ready to listen to your players worries and questions. Accept them for who they are and for what they give to the team. Respect your players and they will respect you. Give credit where it is due focusing mainly on the team as a whole and accept some responsibility for a loss. Remind them that we all make mistakes and will learn from them.

Get to know your players and speak to them individually on a regular basis. Compliment them on aspects of their game and mentioning areas they need to work in can help to further motivate them.

Change of face - layers can get bored of the same old faces! Try bringing in new coaches with fresh and different ideas, perhaps even on a short term basis.

Imagery & Motivation - players can use imagery to mentally rehearse a variety of aspects, like focusing on overcoming a technical weakness or mentally preparing for a match. Relaxation helps as players are more motivated when they realize that they can control stress and anxiety.

## **STRESS, ANXIETY & RELAXATION**

### **Introduction**

The pressure experienced by soccer players especially at a professional level is recognized as influencing playing performance. Heavy playing schedules, competition for team places, the media and fans as well as the pressure to win trophies all play a part in players developing high stress and anxiety levels. Even experienced players can suffer from pre-match stress. Developing ways to control this is important in order to prevent players from "falling" apart.

### **Stress & Anxiety**

*Stress* is described by the Canadian researcher Selye as the "psychophysiological responses of the individual to any influence which disturbs his inner-balance." These psychophysiological changes do however depend on the individual's tolerance to stress. Stress as mentioned earlier can be due to many environmental factors although illness

and nutrition can also play a role. The individual players' reaction to stress can involve aggression and anger or inversely, inhibition, regression and fear. Players are more at risk of injury when stressed due to their attention levels being disorientated. Sports Psychologists can measure stress levels through specially designed questionnaires and by using measurements of heart rates to discover the psychophysiological stress levels. The body prepares for stress through the *fight-flight* reaction which is the response of the body preparing for action via increased heart and breathing rate and the secretion of adrenaline. Anxiety involves a feeling of fear or a perception of threat and which may be specific to a particular situation. Possible symptoms are nausea, loss of composure, reduced motor coordination and aggression. Potential stresses are the climate -- temperature/humidity, circadian body rhythms -- maximum effort is harder in the morning, jet-lag, playing environment -- stadium, spectators, surface, game officials and finally stress created by opponents or between players and the coach. The intensity of these influences on stress depend on the individual perception or inner experience of the player. When players are alert but relaxed, they can make better, quicker decisions during a match. An overanxious player will often make incorrect decisions. Athletes can as well be more motivated when they realize that they can control their anxiety and are then free to play at their top level. By getting to know a player well, a coach can sometimes diagnose why he is overanxious. However, it may be difficult to get through to players suffering from anxiety thus much discretion is needed. A coach can look for various signs such as moments of anger or loss of confidence and players who no longer utilize their skills correctly. Players can as well become isolated and hide away from their team mates or become aggressive and blame everyone else for their problems. A good example is the centre-forward who has not scored for several games who may blame the lack of decent service...

## **Relaxation**

As a consequence of stress and anxiety, those involved in soccer especially at top levels are realizing the need for pre-competition relaxation strategies. Helping the mental state will have a positive effect on the physical state of the player. Players using relaxation techniques may be able to control their thinking to remove tension and conserve energy. According to Bill Beswick a sports psychologist who has worked in top level football for many years, the ideal performance state for a soccer player is that of "relaxed readiness" - - possessing energy without tension. It must be mentioned that no relaxation technique is the best. Players should try various techniques until they find one they like and practice it (perhaps 1 or 2 times per day) so it can be used as a means to help in difficult moments. Many athletes seem to use Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) which allows players to learn the difference between relaxation and tension. The player should lay comfortably, close eyes, breath easily, tense then relax all muscles and maintain a passive attitude. Some techniques also use different muscle tense-relax exercises along with breathing exercises and meditation. Deep muscle relaxation is another procedure often used.. A player forces his attention onto his left leg for example and imagines it getting heavier and heavier and eventually letting it sink into the floor! Generally, relaxation should result in decreased heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate and decreased body metabolism. Anxiety can also strike during a game for example after a mistake.

Bill Beswick lists 5 useful tips on how to recover from this:

1. recover breathing control
2. ease the tension out of the body
3. talk yourself back into the positive
4. let the fear go
5. review your goals and reactivate yourself towards achievement.

Dedicated books and tapes are available containing detailed methods for relaxing. However, before using deep relaxing techniques, it is advised that any subject with a physical or mental disorder should consult their doctor. Finally, some soccer coaches or players may not like using relaxation techniques. Other methods such as giving each player clear and precise instructions about his tasks and responsibilities (during the TeamTalk), giving objective information about the opposing team, explaining the risks to be taken and support he will have and giving praise may help to relax players and take their mind away a little from the game.

## **Conclusion**

In soccer, players may need to develop relaxation skills to counter moments of stress and anxiety which are interrelated. Not only does relaxation help reduce stress and anxiety but can facilitate rest and recovery. Players also need to develop a positive way of looking at the game during moments of difficulty. The coach needs to be aware of the various signs and symptoms of players suffering from stress and anxiety. A Sports Psychologist can help players to reach and stay at their maximal potential.

## **CONFIDENCE**

### **Introduction**

Any coach or player will tell you that one of the most important elements in successful soccer performance is the level of *self-confidence*. Vealey - an expert in sports psychology - describes confidence as "the belief or degree of certainty individuals possess about their ability to be successful in sport." When players are confident they can perform at their best level and it is rare for successful players to have a persistent lack of confidence.

Developing a good general state of confidence is vital for withstanding and recovering from setbacks such as a defeat or a poor performance. There are many characteristics which reflect a player's confidence and this can be observed during training and games through body language and verbal comments.

The following is based on Beswick's (psychologist in English professional soccer) work in top level soccer and lists the messages sent out by players who are high in confidence:- high self-belief - a real "I can do it" attitude

- projecting a positive image through good body language

- enjoying and having fun in competition and training
- not unduly worried about losing or consequences
- calm, collected, concentrated, and high self-control
- don't feel the need to impress others
- accept themselves for the way they are whilst understanding their strengths and weaknesses

These characteristics may be attained through good coaching and management of players and are essential for attaining success in soccer.

### **Ways Of Building Confidence**

There are several methods to build up confidence in your players and team. One of the most influential sources of confidence is often past performance -- success breeds confidence and vice versa. Thus what we might call a *positive confidence cycle* can be developed and this is highly linked to the technique of "goal setting." This technique involves planning and setting goals in training for a player to achieve. These can be short, medium or long term, must be challenging but obtainable. For example, too difficult goals will result in players becoming frustrated. Coaches should try to make training both fun and enjoyable.. They should also reward good performance with compliments and when failure occurs use praise/criticism techniques to advise the players, e.g. after a poor shot:

- Praise the player: "Good power in the shot..."
- Criticize the player: "But I think you can improve the..."
- Praise the player: "I know you can do it..."

Verbal encouragement and treating players with equal respect can play an important part in attaining the right level of confidence, especially coming from experienced and respected coaches. Players can also encourage themselves through positive self-talk -- remember Mohammed Ali's "I am the Greatest !". Transforming thoughts such as "What if I miss the shot" into "I will get the next one in" or "I don't think I am good enough" into "The coaches must think so and trust me as they picked me" will help remove inner doubt.

Another source of confidence can be provided by channeling the nervous energy produced from the stress-response into positive thoughts. Feeling your heart beat strongly can be thought as "I am up for this" rather than "I am scared." Players must also place total trust in their personal skills (as well as in others) to win and be able to screen out distractions. Another means of building up confidence is the observation and imitation of successful players. Coaches may want to organize demonstrations, videos and practices based on what players have seen. However, care must be taken to ensure that players feel they cannot match that player for skill or become frustrated through failure.

Also, Mental Imagery may be employed as a means of mentally rehearsing correct technique, The old saying *practice makes perfect* is also important as a correctly prepared player will start a match knowing they are at the peak of their form and are ready for all

situations that may occur. It is important as well that players who lose confidence do not concentrate too much on the one area of their game where they are struggling and hide the other areas where they are doing well. A good example is a centre-forward who is missing chances, concentrating on all the aspects of his game such as buildup play and creating chances for others can avoid over-emphasizing the one big problem and allow the player to see their overall importance to the team. Beswick calls this seeing the *Big Picture*.

Finally, a player's personal lifestyle will affect their self-confidence. Parents of younger players must never let their egos and dreams get the better of themselves. Children need love, support and understanding whether they win or lose. It is essential for players to have someone in their life to share their feelings with and who can also help guide and provide encouragement.

## **Conclusion**

Both the coach and player have an important role to play in building confidence. Players must always look at the positive side of things, be correctly prepared, committed, see situations as challenges not problems and trust themselves. Making sure of a correct lifestyle will also help maintain confidence. A coach can heavily influence player confidence through a positive philosophy as well as providing demanding yet attainable goals in training and competition. A coach must through correct praise and criticism encourage players to better themselves and to concentrate on every part of their game

## **SETTING GOALS**

### **Setting Goals Effectively**

The way in which you set goal strongly affects their effectiveness. Before you start to set goals, you should have set the background of goal setting by:

- understanding your commitment to the sport
- understanding the level you want to reach within the sport
- knowing the skills that will have to be acquired and the levels of performance that will be needed
- know where this will fit into your overall life goals

These were discussed in the previous section.

### **General Guidelines**

The following broad guidelines apply to setting effective goals:

- Positive Statement - express your goals positively: 'To execute this technique perfectly' is a much better goal than 'don't make this stupid mistake'
- Be Precise - if you set a precise goal, putting in dates, times and amounts so that achievement can be measured, then you know the exact goal to be achieved, and can take complete satisfaction from having completely achieved it.

- Set Priorities - where you have several goals, give each a priority. This helps you to avoid feeling overwhelmed by too many goals, and helps to direct your attention to the most important ones.
- Write goals down to avoid confusion and give them more force.
- Keep Operational Goals Small - keep the goals you are working towards immediately (i.e., in this session) small and achievable. If a goal is too large, then it can seem that you are not making progress towards it. Keeping goals small and incremental gives more opportunities for reward. Today's goals should be derived from larger goals.

### **Important Points**

A number of general principles should be noted about goal setting:

Set Performance, not Outcome Goals – this is very important. You should take care to set goals over which you have as much control as possible - there is nothing as dispiriting as failing to achieve a personal goal for reasons beyond your control such as poor judging, bad weather, injury, excellence in other athletes, or just plain bad luck. Goals based on outcomes are extremely vulnerable to things beyond your control. If you base your goals on personal performance targets or skills to be acquired, then you can keep control over the achievement of your goals and draw satisfaction from them. For example, you might achieve a personal best time, but still be disqualified as a result of a poor judging decision. If you set an outcome goal of being in the top three, then this will be a defeat. If you set a performance goal of achieving a particular time, then you will have achieved the goal and can draw satisfaction and self-confidence from its achievement.

Another flaw is where outcome goals are based on the rewards of winning, whether these are financial or are based on the recognition of being a winner. In early stages these will be highly motivating factors, however as they are achieved, the benefit of winning another prize or championship at the same level reduces. You will become progressively less motivated. One difficulty you will face is that people who are ignorant of sports psychology, such as many poor coaches, parents, media, fans, etc., base their assessment of success on winning. This completely ignores the effect of raw luck on high quality performance. As with many things, stick with what you know is right rather than what uninformed people think. Set Specific goals specific measurable goals. If you achieve all conditions of a measurable goal, then you can be confident and comfortable in its achievement. If you consistently fail to meet a measurable goal, then you can adjust it or analyze the reason for failure and take appropriate action to improve skills. Set Realistic Goals Goals may be set unrealistically high for the following reasons:

Other people - other people (fans, parents, media) can set unrealistic goals for you, based on what they want. Often this will be done in ignorance of your goals and training programs.

Insufficient information - if you do not have a clear, realistic understanding of your sport and of the techniques and performance to be mastered, it is difficult to set effective and

realistic goals.

Always expecting your best performance - many people base their goals on their best performance, however long ago that was. This ignores the inevitable backsliding that can occur for good reasons, and ignores the factors that led to that best performance. It is better to set goals that raise your average performance and make it more consistent.

Lack of respect for self - if you do not respect your right to rest, relaxation and pleasure in life then you risk burnout.

Setting Goals Too Low - alternatively goals can be set too low because of:

Fear of failure - if you are afraid of failure you will not take the risks needed for optimum performance. As you apply goal setting and see the achievement of goals, your self-confidence should increase, helping you to take bigger risks. Know that failure is a positive thing: it shows you areas where you can improve your skills and performance.

Taking it too easy - it is easy to take the reasons for not setting goals unrealistically high as an excuse to set them too low. If you're not prepared to stretch yourself and work hard, then you are extremely unlikely to achieve anything of any real worth.

Setting Goals at the Right Level - setting goals at the correct level is a skill that is acquired by practice. You should set goals so that they are slightly out of your immediate grasp, but not so far that there is no hope of achieving them: no-one will put serious effort into achieving a goal that they believe is unrealistic. However, remember that the belief that a goal is unrealistic may be incorrect. Such a belief can be changed by effective use of imagery. Personal factors such as tiredness, injury, stage in the season, etc., should be taken into account when goals are set. Now try setting some goals, and then measure them against the points above. Adjust them to meet the recommendations and then review them. You should now be able to see the importance of setting goals effectively.