



**The Rugby League
Coach Education Programme**

The Think Coaching E-Link

Issue 16



Welcome to Issue 16 – The Psychology of Winning

Introduction

With Great Britain having just been defeated in their first Tri-nations game they are very much in a backs to the wall situation having to almost certainly win their next game to have any chance of getting to the final. No doubt much of Brian Nobles preparation for the next game will focus on psychological readiness to compete against Australia.

This issue takes an in depth look at the psychology of winning.

Coach Development

The first ever Coach Development Camp has just taken place in Sheffield when nine coaches identified through the Performance Pathway attended three days of workshops and practical coaching sessions.

The camp was a huge success and will be repeated next year. Coaches who attended this year were Dave Banks, Matt Foster, Neil Gregg, Tony Tomlinson, John Winder, Lee Addison, Colin Stevenson, Rob Powell and Martin Cunningham.



Defying Defeat

The cliché “It’s not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game” may have some real value, but nothing hurts like the pain of defeat and it’s the fear of defeat that motivates many towards victory. With the Tri-nations series upon us, all sportspeople, including league players, have suffered the agony of loss, but it’s the psychological battle post contest that may impact most on a defeated athlete the next time he or she walks on the playing field. This interview focuses on defying defeat and speaks to **Steven Folkes**, the Coach of the NRL team, The Bulldogs, on preparing for the next game in the wake of defeat.

Everybody has heard players stating that defeat in a previous encounter was motivation enough to go out and win. Is this necessarily the right motivation to be taking into competition?

It varies from individual to individual and from club to club, but I guess whatever an individual finds motivating is good enough. It can definitely be one element, but I wouldn’t hang my hat on it as a coach. If you have a defeat it all depends on the reasons. If they played poorly and weren’t motivated and weren’t committed then perhaps that’s certainly worth mentioning. It’s more about their own performance and lifting the standard of that.

Does the preparation for the next game differ when coming off a loss?

No, I don’t think so, not greatly. Obviously, winning is what it’s all about, so as a team you become more focused to win and maybe that’s not a good thing. You should probably be more focused on the processes of getting the two points rather than the actual win itself. But different situations call for different approaches, if you’ve lost five in a row, obviously winning the next game is going to be fairly important to you as player and as a team.

What tips or suggestions would you have for coaches and players coming off a loss?

Your players lost because they didn’t do certain things as well as the opposition. They really need to get those processes right, and hopefully if they do all that right, the outcome will look after itself.

Folkes raises the issue of getting the “processes” right. Skills training and fitness training are important but in game conditions the effects of poor nutrition and dehydration can affect mental and physical fitness. Choices made in a game can be severely affected if the body is under stress. In tight games, one bad decision by each player from being unfocussed and lacking concentration can lead to defeat. Fueling the body before and during a game will starve off physical and mental fatigue – helping the mind stay fresh and alert, keeping eyes peeled for opportunities for success - helping the body maintain peak performance for longer, taking those opportunities and turning them into success. Fueling the body after a game will also ensure faster recovery for the next round.

Of course, using the home ground advantage where possible to boost team spirit is also an effective tool to defy defeat. Supporters like nothing better than to cheer their team to victory, especially after a disappointing loss.

If an individual player in a team sport makes an error that cost’s the team victory, what does a coach say?

I think you have to make sure they understand the reasons behind the error. If players start to

dwell on mistakes, then obviously they will continue to make similar sorts of errors. Understanding why they did it, what they should have done and why they didn't do it is key to getting over mistakes and trying to learn from them. That's something I certainly learnt as a player.

When mistakes are made by players early on in the season there are many chances to make up for their follies. Swallowing the defeat, going back and working through the team's errors and seeing where it all went wrong is essential. But what about major defeats in finals or grand finals, where a loss can have a long lasting psychological effect on a player or team? Running through the mistakes and failed techniques over the off-season will do nothing for the players' troubled psyche. The off-season should be a time for relaxation and recovery and a renewed vigour to work better and harder in the coming season.

Sports psychology is an important asset for coaches. When Steven Folkes played rugby league, sports psychologists weren't used regularly. He remembers that there were certainly a few around, but he realises that sports psychology has become far more of a science and that increasingly it is the role of the sports psychologist and the coach to help athletes rationalize and cope with a major defeat.

The mistakes that lead to defeat may well be borne from anxiety and an inability to deal with intense pressure that team sports can bring. One theory suggests that an athlete with a strong self-esteem will always cope better with defeat and that this strong self esteem makes the player less likely to crumble in the face of extreme pressure.

If uncharacteristic mistakes begin to regularly occur for a player under pressure, and skills, fitness, nutrition and hydration issues can be discounted, sessions with a sports psychologist may be valuable in revealing an underlying anxiety. With time, the problem can be treated, fortifying the athletes with skills to fight against future attacks. If it's revealed that the athlete's poor performance is more psychological than physical, a sport psychologist can assist the athlete in rationalizing the loss and work with the athlete to resolve the issues that prevent peak performance.

Indeed, it could be the case that sports psychology may well be helping to reinforce the resolve of today's sportspeople who, if left unassisted, may well have fallen to pieces in the heat of competition and would never have reached the highs enjoyed by champion athletes.

Practical Tips

- After a loss, don't leave it too long before addressing the team's disappointment.
- Encourage team players to find and implement solutions together to improve morale and focus on what they can achieve and do better rather than what they did wrong.
- If an individual player is at fault, find a time to take them aside to discuss the issues privately and determine solutions and a strategy to implement these goals.
- Consider the players/ team's fitness and skills training regime and review their nutrition and hydration strategies before, during and after training and competition.
- Determine if sessions with a sports psychologist will help and make the referral personally.
- Take a good look at your own attitude as a coach – help your players rise to the occasion to achieve both personal and team success and you too will feel the satisfaction that success brings.

References

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How to develop a winning attitude

By Wayne Goldsmith

Grand Final Day.

The team gathers in the locker room. This is an intense, high pressure environment that few experience and even fewer survive. A former player – one of the nation's greatest - walks into the dressing room. There is a respectful hush as he starts to speak.

He talks about pride.

He talks about spirit.

He talks about commitment – about attitude.

He talks about winning – the history of the club in Grand Finals.

With tears in his eyes he begins to recite the names of the great players who have gone before.

He asks players to stand and link arms and to join him in the Club song.

He has done a great MOTIVATIONAL TALK.

This is the perception many people have about the word motivation as it applies to high performance sport: a one off emotion charged lecture from a professional speaker or motivator or sports psychologist.

Effective motivation is not a one off talk by a high powered speaker. It is not the promise of a present or gift or bag of money. It is not a single temporary burst of emotion. Effective Motivation is a lifestyle. Motivated people live a lifestyle where they are motivated to achieve excellence in everything they do. Every task, every activity, every challenge is an opportunity to set a goal, to try something new and to achieve.

Try this simple exercise.

Have several players sit together before their next training session. Ask them to perform a simple task –making a paper plane. Demonstrate how you would like them to make the plane. Now give them three minutes to perform the task and observe the players performing their task. Some players will fold the paper so that it looks roughly like the demonstration version. Others will fold and bend the paper so that it is identical in most ways to the demonstration version but with small variations in the shape and size of the folds here and there.

Perhaps one player will ensure that every fold is even and smooth. They will make certain that the left and right sides of the plane are balanced and symmetrical. They may even put in a couple of extra folds on the wing to try and make a more advanced design. And that's the attitude coaches and players should aim to foster – the attitude to do every task – regardless of its nature - to the best of their own ability.

Where the other players have asked of themselves "Can I do this" or "How can I do this", one player has asked "How can I do this well and maybe even do it better than expected". The player has challenged himself and been motivated to complete a relatively simple task to the best of his ability.

Consider the above example in terms of a **training activity**.

The coach asks the team to perform a basic drill – in this case running and carrying a ball while side stepping through a set of “cones”. The coach demonstrates the skill, discusses the aim of the activity, asks for questions, demonstrates again and then steps back to allow the players to try the activity.

As with the paper plane, the coach observes a range of behaviours from his players as they try the drill several times.

Player one performs the drill correctly.

Player two also performs the drill correctly but adds an element of speed into the activity to test their skill level when moving faster.

Player three also performs the drill correctly. He also tries to perform the drill at speed but adds an additional element by starting the drill with a step off his left leg the first time, then starting with his right leg the next time to learn to step off either leg with equal skill.

This is the challenge for coaches. There is nothing wrong with what Player one did. He followed the instructions of the coach and performed the activity as required. However, Player two and Player three challenged themselves to perform the task to a higher standard than what was required. For some reason they were **MOTIVATED** to perform a simple task given to them by their coach to the best of their ability. They decided to set a more challenging goal and then worked to achieve it.

Player one was **involved** in the activity. Players two and three were **committed** to the activity. They approached a relatively simple task with the commitment to do it well.

How do coaches turn this **INVOLVEMENT** into **COMMITMENT**?

Much of the success of these motivated players comes from their ability to set challenging goals and to manage the process of achieving their goals. The great news is that goal setting and goal management is a simple concept for players to learn because that is the way we all work every day in everything we do. For example. Goal – I want a cup of tea. Solution – I will make one. Goal: I would like to earn some money. Solution – I will apply for a job.

Our brains work in terms of setting goals and achieving them. Goal setting is a very natural process and humans are by nature very goal orientated.

In high performance sport, the challenge for coaches and players is to set high performance goals and to achieve them through high performance practices and attitudes. It has been said that the key to success is to develop “the will to win”. However, **the will to win** is not worth anything without the daily commitment to do what it takes to **prepare to win**. It is common for players to want to win – but how many support this desire to win with focus and concentration and determination in everything they do?

There is a sign on the door of the United States Olympic Training Centre dining room. The same sign is on the gym doors and on the doors to other training venues in the Olympic Training Centre. It is all over the Centre so that players, coaches, sports scientists and administrators can see it and be reminded of it constantly. It says:

NOT EVERY FOUR YEARS: EVERYDAY.

This simple sign reminds every individual involved in high performance sport that excellence comes from things practiced and mastered in every training session, every day: that Olympic success every four years comes from the little successes achieved every time an athlete runs, swims, lifts weights, stretches etc.

Being above average

Group training activities by their nature often mean that individualised training is difficult for the coach to establish. Different levels of fitness, maybe different ages, different levels of ability and so on mean that often training activities can not be set precisely for each player.

Most commonly in these situations, the coach prescribes training activities at an “average level”. That is the training tasks are not too demanding for the players of lower ability nor are they too easy for the talented players. However, it is not the task, but how the players attack the task that makes all the difference.

It is not what you do, but HOW you do it that matters.

Discussions on the topic of training programs, of variations in volume and intensity, of percentage of training done in the various training zones, of the types of exercises and drills to do etc are important. Coaches, players and sports scientists regularly debate the positives and negatives of **WHAT TO DO.**

However, it is the **HOW THEY** (the players) do it that is vital to the success of the training program. Leading USA Swimming Coach Mark Schubert (coach of World record holder and Olympic Champion

Janet Evans) said recently, “A coach told me that he had a poor taper and subsequently his swimmers had performed poorly at their state championships. I replied, “You didn’t have a poor taper – you had a poor season of training”. “It’s the little things your players do everyday in training, their attitude to every training session and their commitment to every task they attempt in their program that determines how well they do in competition. A great taper will not save you from a poor training effort”.

Successful people (and players) rely heavily on setting and achieving goals – little targets to achieve in their daily lives that provide focus and motivation. The cumulative effect of setting and achieving these small daily goals can be enormous and lead to success at the highest levels.

For example in the Rugby League drills practice:

Coaches instruction: Perform the drill correctly. The players then interpret the coach’s instructions in one of several different ways:

Player one – Goal: Perform the drill correctly.

Player two – Goal: Perform the drill correctly as fast as I can.

Player three – Goal: Perform the drill correctly as fast as I can without making any errors and start off alternate legs to develop the skill to step off either leg at speed.

Each player has set a goal and aimed to achieve it. However, each player has set different goals based on their level of ability, confidence, past experience and other factors.

Make it Happen – Let it Happen

Many players suffer from “nerves” – being anxious and nervous on the day of competition.

This is because 90% of all STRESS comes from not doing things when they were supposed to be done!

One of the great challenges coaches and players face is allowing training to be completed at a standard lower than their expected competition performance. Many players muddle through training doing the minimum standard of effort and application only to find that their competition performances are also lack lustre.

Why? In training they have **LET IT HAPPEN** – they have allowed training to become a place where sub standard skills and poor habits become acceptable practices. Then when they go to the

competition and try to **MAKE IT HAPPEN** (i.e. force a successful performance to occur) they find they lack the skills, fitness and abilities to produce a winning effort.

Conversely, successful players have an attitude that **MAKES IT HAPPEN** in training. They apply the same focus and intensity in training that they apply in competition. As a result, on competition day, they can RELAX knowing that they can **LET IT HAPPEN** – success is more likely to occur because of their attitude in training.

Leading Australian Swimming Coach Laurie Lawrence once said of confidence in competition, “Nothing gives an athlete confidence like knowing they have done everything they possibly could have done to their best of their ability in training and preparation”.

The key to this approach is: **TRAIN AS YOU WOULD COMPETE**. If players learn to commit to achieving excellence in everything they do in training and to apply the same focus and determination to training well as they do to competing, they create an **environment of excellence** in their club or training group. This attitude can make a significant difference to all the players in the group or squad.

As a wise coach once said, “**Attitudes are contagious – is yours worth catching?**”

Summary

Successful training programs help players develop a wide range of skills and abilities. Over a training season, players develop the characteristics they require to achieve their best in competition through a logical sequence of periodised training activities. It would not make sense for a sprinter to wait until the morning of their first race of the season to start practicing speed development techniques.

It is not logical for a Rugby League player to start practicing kicking and passing techniques on the morning of the first game of the year. It therefore is not sensible to wait until the day of the big game to try and develop mental skills. Mental skills need to be developed in every session, every day and in every training activity. By establishing and reaching training goals every day in practice, players develop the confidence and belief that anything is possible in competition.

If success in High Performance sport is as many people suggest, “99% mental”, then neglecting daily mental skills training is to neglect the key to competition success. In many ways **success is a choice** – as it comes from the decisions and choices players make in every training and competition situation.

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Drop us a line at haydn.walker@rfl.uk.com

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