

MENTAL SKILLS:

A perspective on their role in ‘performance’ and how to understand and develop them.

Presented by: Gazing Performance Ltd

In our experience the **mental component** of sporting performance is seldom given the same level of attention as physical skills. Yet, in the highly pressurised cauldron of international sport, it is accepted that, when all else is equal, it is often the individuals who have the strongest mental attitude that succeed. In this article we will briefly explore some of the components that go to making a rugby player ‘*mentally strong*’, particularly under pressure, and we look at the work Gazing has been doing to develop them.

THE PRIME ISSUE IS CONTROL OF ATTENTION

The human brain is a complex organ. However, despite its complexity it also has significant functional limitations. The greatest single limitation of the human brain is that we only have the ability to concentrate effectively on one thing at a time, unless the tasks are very simple.

Put simply, your attention is either focused on a useful process or it is diverting from that process. We use colours to help describe this, which indicate whether you are in the **Red (diverting from task)** or you are in the **Blue (fully engaged: ‘On Task’)**.

Disruptive events and the accompanying thoughts and emotions can divert our attention away from the task and limit the effectiveness of our performance. Diversions typically involve worry, concern or anger over things that have happened in the past or that might happen in the future. This means that if some of our attention is diverted onto concerns about potential negative outcomes, there is less mental capacity left to apply to the task at hand. This leads to impaired performance.

HOW DOES YOUR ATTENTION GET DIVERTED?

Pressure Points

It is very helpful to be aware of the kind of situations that can divert us and take us ‘off task.’ We refer to these situations as ‘Pressure Points’ because they create pressure within us and, depending on the importance we place on them, have the ability to divert us from the task at hand and inhibit our performance. Common ‘Pressure Points’ might be personal dramas, non-selection, drop-off of form, a hostile crowd or playing against a ‘name’ player.

Loops

If an issue makes us feel under threat in some way, we get driven into loops. These **'loop'-type mental processes** involve unhelpful interpretations and emotional responses that divert or split attention away from effective processes. When we are in a loop, our attention becomes stuck as we go round and round in a spiral of negative thinking; common feelings are, "we're going to lose" or "that's not fair" and so on. These negative perceptions 'drive' negative emotional responses, such as anxiety and anger, which tend to lead to unhelpful behaviours. These behaviours lead to poor outcomes, such as feeling stuck, confused, or inert, which in turn reinforces the original negative perceptions, starting the cycle all over again – hence the term 'loop'. We cope by getting angry or withdrawing, shutting down, externalising or projecting our feelings onto someone else such as the referee, opposition player, or coach.

What do high performers do?

High performers get in loops less of the time because they condition themselves to deliberately place attention on key processes or, alternatively, they learn to recognize more quickly when they are in loops, so that they can re-direct their attention back onto effective processes faster. The minds of top performers under pressure are characterised by deliberate, controlled focus of attention moving between the overview and specific processes. The first task is to determine where attention is being placed.

Summary

1. Poor performance is often caused by diverted attention.
2. Negative emotional responses arise from negative interpretations of situations.
3. Negative emotional responses can lead to unhelpful behaviours, such as over- or under-reactions that do not contribute to performance.
4. Loops are internal responses triggered by external events that are perceived as threatening.
5. We often confuse the trigger for our response, which is external, with our actual emotional response, which is internal.
6. High performers typically place their attention on the critical processes that will lead to desired outcomes rather than the outcomes themselves. Winning and losing are the end-results of processes performed well or poorly.

WHAT DO I NEED TO DO TO GET IT RIGHT?

There are a group of elements that need to be considered for a team to be able to perform to its potential.

1. Alignment and Direction

Your direction needs to be established. What are your goals, what is your purpose and how does that fit with the team's goals and purpose?

2. Skills/Resources

What are the necessary skills you need? There are core skills and skills that may be required for your specialist position. What resources are available to you to help you

achieve the level of skill you require? Resources might include trainer, coach, physiotherapist, nutritionist, coach etc. In our experience, the more elite the athlete, the broader their resource base.

3. Discipline

No one has achieved without having disciplines in place to assist them in their process. This normally means having a framework to support them. A plan that involves consistency of effort, regular reviews to chart progress and the ability to be able to communicate clearly is what is needed.

4. Risk Analysis

Being prepared helps us to cope with the unexpected. It allows us to have strategies in place. When we are clear what these strategies are, then we are more likely to be able to stay 'On Task'.

5. Motivation

It is up to individuals to motivate themselves. However, a strong team community can greatly enhance our ability to stay motivated. Having a balance in our lives helps as well. We each contribute to the team's motivation. We do this by being, for example, on time to training or by being respectful of our coach and fellow players.

Many people succeed because they have a huge 'drive.' That means the implications of success are hugely important to them. This drive helps them to persist. It also assists them in coping with the discomfort of training, the long hours in the gym, the physical confrontations, the never-ending training sessions and the sheer boredom that is sometimes part of becoming a successful athlete. If it means something to you, you will do it. If it doesn't, you won't.

FINALLY

It is critical that you build the mental conditioning process into your training regime. If everything else is equal - your fitness, strength, agility and skill level - then it is the individual with the strongest mental skills that will succeed. History clearly shows that teams and individuals with far less talent but a huge desire to win often do so. But having desire alone isn't enough. Mental toughness is something you can develop and drill but, just like physical skills, it requires repetition and being clear about what it is you need to do. It requires planning and planning requires a framework to give you the best chance of success.

GAZING'S ROLE IN THE RFU

For the last two years, Gazing Performance have been working with the RFU Performance Department as part of the continuing focus on achieving '**world class**' performance throughout the whole organisation. The primary focus of Gazing's work was initially within the Performance Department Management team to create a common **day-to-day operating framework** which would support the objectives described within the World Class Performance Plan. That work has now evolved and widened into specific areas of the performance department, most notably in the areas of **Elite Coaching** and the **National Academy Programmes**. It is in these areas that the focus has been providing a framework for understanding and developing the mental skills

associated with performing and playing at the highest level. It is this framework that is now being used with the top players from age fourteen until they are selected into senior national squads.

The programme, part of the overall National Academy Programme, involves a series of workshop sessions with the coaches and players themselves. Gazing's role is to introduce this common approach, which has now been termed '**the England Way to develop mental skills**'.

Gazing are not there to get in the way of the rugby!

Although the emphasis for the two groups, coaches and players, is slightly different, the platform and language are the same. A primary driver for our work is to provide the tools for coaches *and* players to develop the mental skills themselves. This means our role is simply transference of the framework. This allows the process of developing 'mental skills' to commence at the earliest opportunity and be continuously and consistently reinforced with the aim of creating better, **mentally stronger elite players for the future.**

If you would like more detailed information or have any questions, please contact Gazing Performance at www.gazing.com.