

KEY QUESTIONS ON MENTAL TOUGHNESS

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What is mental toughness?

Mental toughness refers to a player's psychological skills that are advantageous to performance. But what are these skills? One way to begin thinking about psychological skills is to think of a player that you admire for their on-field ability. Ask yourself - "What mental characteristics make that player stand out?" For example, some attributes might be a player's concentration under pressure, motivation to train/perform or confidence.

Can mental toughness be taught?

Mental toughness is often referred to in everyday conversations as an elusive quality possessed by only a few elite sportspeople. On the contrary, it is the view of people working in sport psychology that psychological skills can be taught.

While psychological skills themselves are often talked about, the psychological methods used to enhance these skills are not as well known. Often, players have developed some of these skills through experience and also through trial and error. Over time they tried different techniques and adopted those that worked and modified those that did not.

Practical sport psychology is about developing mental toughness by teaching and practising proven methods with players and coaches. Sport psychology has several goals for teaching these mental skills, including enhancing performance and increasing enjoyment. Some of the more well-known methods for enhancing mental skills for sport include goal setting, self-talk and imagery. Elements of a mental toughness program can be as simple as developing a set routine of physical and mental preparation designed to get a player ready (physically and mentally) before a game and when returning to the field after half-time. This routine could involve going over key tasks as they will need to be performed on the field both in your mind (for example using imagery and self-talk) and physically.

How much time should a player spend on mental skills?

The amount of time that players should spend on their mental toughness will vary depending on how important they feel it is for their performance. One way to ensure a player has an appropriate balance in his training is for the player to ask him/herself – “How much time do I spend training my body for competition (e.g. fitness, skills, strength)?” Then ask him/herself – “How much time do I spend training my mind for competition (e.g. motivation, confidence, concentration)?” Despite the role that aspects such as concentration and confidence play in achieving their best performance, the majority of players find they spend far more time training physically, neglecting the mental aspects of their performance. This does not mean that a player should train mental skills more than physical skills, but it does mean that mental skills should be given some consideration.

What can I do as a coach?

Often, one of the most effective ways a sport psychology professional can assist a team is by consulting with the coach. As the readership of this magazine is primarily coaches, I have decided to focus on two coaching strategies that impact on the mental toughness of players.

Strategy one - Open and honest communication. In my research, rugby players have expressed a desire for open and honest communication. Within any team environment, coaches face challenges that, if not handled appropriately, may result in negative outcomes for the individual players and/or the team. In rugby this issue often has to do with selection. Players often feel threatened in the rugby environment if they are not selected. If the reasons for non-selection are not explained clearly, players can lose confidence (i.e. decreased mental toughness) in their ability and the coach. Poor communication can lead to a perception of unfair treatment and leave players feeling undervalued, unmotivated and isolated whilst losing trust and respect for the coach.

While good communication is often acknowledged as a valuable team asset and is a core value in many team environments, many coaches are still unsure on how to facilitate it. Some key guidelines for coaches when communicating with players are:

- ***Plan the points you want to get across.*** This will help ensure your message is easy to follow.
- ***Keep it simple.*** Often, three new things are as much as someone can contemplate at once. Overload will result in a lost message.

- ***Stick to the relevant information.*** For example, a player could be confused after discussing his non-selection with a coach if many more positive, rather than negative, aspects of the player's performance were discussed.
- ***Provide opportunities for players to communicate their concerns.***
- ***Encourage player feedback and participation.*** This often helps to facilitate understanding.
- ***Build understanding.*** Share perspectives with players. Enhancing their understanding of your concerns may help them to empathise with your point of view and vice versa.
- ***Address the problem not the player.*** Make sure any criticism is directed towards the player's actions rather than him personally.

Strategy two - competition simulation. Simulating competition situations and pressure is a key strategy to build a player's mental toughness. Confidence primarily comes from physical practice because it provides a player with the knowledge that he has successfully completed the task in the past. Coaches can help facilitate this by simulating the pressure situations. For example, many coaches advocate running players through drills such as three attackers on two defending players in a limited space, forcing ad-hoc decision-making and execution. While simulating pressure is common within some training environments, coaches can extend this to other possible situations, such as goal kicking, playing with a man down, defensive live scrummaging and practising with a proper referee. The key is to make the situations as real as possible.

What about individual player skills?

Players can work on psychological skills individually. Psychological skills can be enhanced by using a number of different methods, such as imagery, self-talk and goal setting as mentioned earlier. Covering all of these is beyond the scope of my comment here.

An example of a method that can help individuals to build mental toughness is self-talk. Self-talk simply refers to the things that players say to themselves inside their head while they are playing. Self-talk can be simple skill instructions. For example, a goal kicker may say, "Head down, follow through," to his/her self just prior to taking a kick in order to focus on the technique of the kick rather than the importance of the outcome. In the same situation a goal kicker may say, "I have kicked from this distance thousands of times before," to his/her self to promote confidence prior to taking an important kick.

What about team mental toughness?

There are also certain attributes that make some teams mentally tougher than other teams. For example, some teams have a high ability to work well together under pressure. Team work is often referred to in sport psychology as the **task cohesion** of a group. There is also another dimension to cohesion - social cohesion - or, how well players get on together in social situations. Task cohesion, however, is often the primary concern of coaches as it relates more directly to on-field performance. There are several ways that coaches can build task cohesion. For example, doing tasks that require good communication and understanding among players on the field is one way to help facilitate task cohesion. These team activities not only help the team, they can also benefit an individual player's confidence and motivation.

Where can I get more information?

Relatively recently, several books have been published on mental toughness for rugby players. In addition a number of books contain specific rugby examples. Not every coach or player wants to study/read books, but the following list may help those who do.

Collins & Hale (2002). *'Rugby Tough'*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Hodge, K.P., Sleivert, G., & McKenzie, A. (1999). *'Thinking Rugby'*. Auckland: Reed Books.

Bull, S.J., Albinson, J.G & Shambrook, C.J. (1996). *'The Mental Game Plan: Getting Psyched For Sport'*. Eastbourne, U.K: Sports Dynamics.