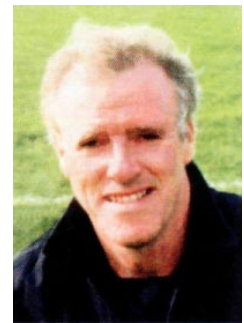


Football Performance and Sports Psychology



BILL BESWICK

After many years of trying to improve performance on the football field by sophisticated coaching, improved fitness conditioning, better diet and nutrition, and a whole range of medical support, I suspect it was only a natural progression to seek the winning edge mentally and create the arrival of sports psychologists.

Certainly my involvement in football at the highest level comes from similar thinking from two very experienced Managers - Jim Smith and Howard Wilkinson - and two great coaches - Mick Wadsworth and Steve McLaren.

Mick Wadsworth, now Manager of Scarborough, but then Regional Director in the Programme for Excellence at The Football Association, was the first to see the potential applications of sports psychology. It was Mick's idea that we developed the concept of the Footballer as a Computer - needing the necessary hardware (physical qualities) but also needing software programming (mental qualities). We have all heard the phrase 'Rubbish in, Rubbish out!'

Jim Smith, the Manager, and Steve McLaren, the Coach, first invited me to Derby County to solve a particular problem - getting them out of a slump. Having achieved this and then promotion, we have gone on to develop a working relationship where I attend 2 days a week, plus match day, as a fully integrated member of the coaching staff. Although the players at Derby County nicknamed me 'Psycho Bill' I always make it clear, 'I am a STRETCH not a SHRINK'. My role as an Applied Sports Psychologist is to work alongside the coaching staff and help resolve any performance problems that could be considered psychological - in that way I help 'stretch' performance the odd 1 or 2 per cent that could make all the difference.

My task at Derby County is to programme positive mental attitudes in as many ways as possible, but always in an informal, relaxed and non-threatening manner that fits in with the culture of a Football Club. So, on any given day at the Club I might be involved in any one of the following services:

- meeting with Jim and the coaches.
- 'mentoring' Steve McLaren - coaching the coach

- making a presentation - to the first team, reserves, youth team or Centre of Excellence parents
- making myself available for 'chats'
- checking in with my regular 'clients'
- supporting and discussing recovery plans with the injured players
- setting a short questionnaire which profiles psychological strengths and weaknesses
- 'intervening' with a player at the request of the manager or coach
- going out to training, being an extra member of staff but observing the player behaviour and being available if needed
- checking with Steve, the 'mental health' of the team, dealing with success or failure, and reviewing the challenges ahead
- on a match day, I would be particularly concerned with all aspects of pre-match preparation and post-match emotional management.

This structure allows me to observe the pressure close-up and to act when necessary in 'programming' a whole range of psychological 'software' skills - such as confidence building, commitment, composure, mental toughness, emotional intelligence, mistake management, overcoming mental blocks and so on.

My current work for The Football Association involves two main tasks. Firstly, to work up and develop the specific expertise and knowledge regarding the common sense application of psychological aspects in relation to football and footballers. Secondly, I am involved as part of the team of coaches in assisting Howard Wilkinson with the England Under 18 Youth Team.

What is developing from that work is a concept that a team, and especially an International Team, needs an 'emotional' game-plan as well as both 'physical' and 'mental' game-plans. This 'emotional' game-plan - a

strategy to create the right 'frame of mind' and the self and collective discipline to maintain it under pressure - is vital as loss of emotional control disrupts all other aspects of play.

So my experience with the England Under 18 Team and Derby County has given me both an excellent body of knowledge on the impact of sports psychology on football performance plus a host of relevant case studies to illustrate it. All these I will be sharing with members of The FA. Coaches Association at some Regional Meetings but especially at the Summer Refresher Courses, where the theme will be:

'THE MIND IS THE ATHLETE, THE BODY THE MEANS'

Bill Beswick, M.Ed, has an extensive background in sport as a player, coach, student, teacher and a broadcaster, with especial success as Coach to the England Men's Basketball Team - including a Commonwealth Gold Medal.

He now runs a private practice - SportsMIND - offering Sports Psychology services to a range of sports, but particularly football with contracts at Derby County, the England Under 18 Youth Team and the England Women's Team.

Bill's first book on Football - 'Football, Coaching and the Team Psychologist' - will be launched later this year.