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# MENTAL TOUGHNESS IN FOOTBALL: THE ROLE OF THE COACH

**Rarely does a major competition, or even a match, go by without somebody referring to mental toughness. The purpose of this article is to provide an insight to what mental toughness is, and what factors contribute to it, within an elite football population, while also giving coaches some guidance to how they can contribute to its development.**

Mental toughness is having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to:


Generally, cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, lifestyle) that sport places on the performer.

Specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure.

The definition is important for a number of reasons. It suggests that mental toughness is something that can be developed. It also suggests that mental toughness has a 'competitive'

aspect. For instance, players who are mentally tough will be able to 'cope better than opponents', 'be more consistent than opponents'. Finally, mentally tough players need to be able to cope with a variety of demands that are placed on them and not just those that are performance-related.

When we studied professional players [1], they identified ten key attributes that characterised mental toughness in football.



**“MENTALLY TOUGH PLAYERS WERE THOSE WHO RAISED THEIR PERFORMANCE FOR THE BIG GAMES AND THAT THEY ENJOYED THE PRESSURE”**



**Attribute 1** – Having total self-belief that you will achieve. Players said that self-belief was the key driving force behind them being able to reach the international level. This was especially important given the range of challenges that they had to overcome to reach the highest level. Coach tip - develop training sessions where belief is continually reinforced by player accomplishments. In addition, the manner in which you show support and belief in your players is important. Know what works for each player in your team.

**Attribute 2** – Always wanting the ball. Following a mistake, players felt they had to put it right, and that to do so they wanted the ball. Similarly, when

playing well, players wanted the ball to show their prowess over others. Coach tip – consider how your players respond following mistakes and, where appropriate, create environments that put them under pressure and still require them to ‘want the ball’.

**Attribute 3** – Reacting to situations positively. Players discussed performance ‘ups’ and ‘downs’. These related to issues such as selection, mistakes in performance and injury. While some situations are emotionally volatile and frustrating, players saw a need to react positively. Coach tip - encourage players to focus on the reasons why the situation came about and enable them to become aware of what the next thing is that they should focus on.

**Attribute 4** – ‘Hanging on’ and being calm under pressure. There were times when players literally ‘hung on’ during matches due to their ability to cope with the intense pressure often experienced within international football. Such issues related to having to hold on to a game in the closing minutes, and being able to defend calmly at key set-pieces. Coach tip – create environments where there is intense pressure on performance units within training to either score or defend effectively. Also, with players expecting pressure, discuss with your players how they would respond in certain situations and then develop training scenarios accordingly.

**Attribute 5** – Be able to grind yourself out of trouble. Players commented on

situations where they struggled with training and/or a game situation, but they were able to focus on the basics and get through rather than giving up. This suggests that they were aware that optimal levels of performance cannot be sustained at all times, and when performance drops they need to adopt a mindset that enables them to get through. Coach tip – create training situations where players experience unexpected challenges to ascertain how they respond. For example, training with a senior squad may take players out of their comfort zone.

**Attribute 6** – Ignore distractions and remain focused. Mentally tough players focus their energies into football related issues (eg. training and matches) rather than on inappropriate distractions. They can also ignore match-related distractions such as spectator influences or the importance of the game, and instead have a clear focus on what they were trying to achieve. Coach tip – develop this by identifying clear and specific goals for training. With respect to switching on, some players may respond effectively to ‘switching on time’ just prior to training or matches. This is similar to having a pre-session / match routine.

**Attribute 7** – Keeping emotions in control. Mentally tough players keep their emotions in check. This includes emotions pre-game, in-game, and post-game. Importantly, they commented that they needed an ‘emotional zone’ in which they best operate. Coach tip – Help your players identify the emotions that they experience in a range of situations and what influences they have on their performance to help them find their ‘ideal performance state.’ Structure training to elicit such emotional responses.

**Attribute 8** – Creating an aura. Mentally tough players have an aura and come across as being supremely confident and as though they ‘belong’. Some commented that they forced themselves

to behave in this way to create the impression. Coach tip – Although reported to be developed over time, you can enable some development here by monitoring player behaviour in varying situations. From this, you can feedback to them on whether their body-language comes across as positive and dominant.

**Attribute 9** – Having things outside of football under control. Truly mentally tough individuals had everything outside of football in order. While they acknowledged it was natural to have distractions relating to their private life, the players who were tough were able to rationalise what was going on and manage themselves accordingly. Coach tip – help players become aware of the situations that might lead to a lack of control. An excellent way of doing this would be to enable your players to learn from elite level players and identify how they go about being managing themselves professionally.

**Attribute 10** – Enjoy performance pressure. Mentally tough players were those who raised their performance for the big games and that they enjoyed the pressure. They also commented that ‘after all, surely that is what players want to do...play in the biggest games’. Coach tip – The key here would be to create an environment where players are always looking to perform at the highest level and also see it as a chance to test themselves against the best at that level.

#### Summary

There are ten key attributes associated with mental toughness and through careful structuring of training sessions the coach can help develop these. The article has focused on some of the key environmental factors that you create for the players given that you tend to have control over these. The challenge for the modern coach is to ensure that mental toughness attributes are developed alongside the other attributes required for the complete player.



#### Biography

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#### References

1. Thelwell, R.C., Weston, N.J.V., & Greenlees, I.A. (2005). Defining and understanding mental toughness within soccer. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 17, 326-332.