

## **The Complete Player**

### **Mental and emotional readiness is needed along with the physical skills**

Following is an outline of a presentation by Bill Beswick to the NSCAA Academy staff coaches at the midsummer in-service training program at Penn State University. He addressed the candidates at the Academy course in January 2000 in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., He also gave a presentation at the 2000 NSCAA Convention in Baltimore.

### **The demands of football**

- Requires both endurance and explosive energy
- Has ever-changing patterns of play; a continual unfolding of problems
- Is aggressive and intimidating
- Can be injury-threatening
- May be decided in one defining moment - for or against
- Makes enormous demands on concentration and responsibility
- Has moments of extreme responsibility, e.g., penalties
- Sometimes carries national significance
- Has clear winners and losers
- Is instantly evaluated and judged upon
- Produces media heroes and bums

### **Complete performance**

A complete performance demands passion as sport is emotion-based. Lifestyle and its impact on performance are best exemplified by Paul Gasgione. The physical demands marry both endurance and explosiveness. These qualities vary in individuals. Technical ability is being accelerated. As the physical aspect of football improves, it, in turn, means that all technical aspects are under greater time constraints. Players must have greater ball control as defensive pressure is increased. The mental part of the game includes periods of long concentration and retention of composure over that same time span. The ability to cope emotionally is under constant pressure. David Beckham's inability to momentarily cope was devastating to England's World Cup effort versus Argentina.

Ajax of Holland relies on its TIPS (technique-intelligence-personality-speed) as a measuring device in player evaluation. Early on, youngsters are graded on technique and speed. The other two attributes become key assessments after the player is 16 years and older. A player's technique can be improved both in form and speed of execution. Physical speed is least improved. In player evaluation coaches can use computer terminology. "Software" refers to the mental capacity to meet soccer's challenges. "Hardware" is deemed the physical capacity to meet the demands of the game. The coaching ideal is to have the player lead a healthy lifestyle with well-shaped mental and emotional attitudes which will allow the player to maximize the physical potential.

Use the CHECK system to gauge player readiness: confidence, health/energy, emotional control, concentration, knowledge of game plan, specifics, learning my job.

Talent gets you to the door; intelligence gets you in.

The team must create, build the environment, create a culture for the players to flourish in. With the demands on the professional player today, each team must build social support for the player. This means plenty of professional support from the staff, including sport psychologists and others.

You should never be better than when you lose.

### **The complete player - mental skills**

- Highly motivated and welcomes challenge - a competitive "animal." U.S. women's team exemplifies motivation. Manchester United begins practice with a 10 v. 2 keep-away game with the late comers to be the next two in the middle.
- Strong self-concept; sees himself as a great player. Identity/ image very important to women players. The threat (fear) of the great player is "How will I cope?" It serves to drive him or her to excel at soccer.
- Great confidence in all situations; positive self-talker.
- Can change negatives into positives. This is the key to championship teams. The U.S. women have an "in" list and an "out" list. Things they want to think about; things they don't want to think about.
- Can handle the "dips" and recover from mistakes.
- Has mental toughness; can be trusted to stay disciplined. Approaches every game as a 90-minute battle. This is an excellent habit.
- Handles stress well.
- Constantly self-references and adapts; a learning player. The key to building character is for players to take ownership of their pluses and minuses and then be able to take ownership of their own progress.
- Highly focused and never distracted.
- Has great work ethic and persistence - even when it hurts.
- Brave enough to want the ball - and make things happen even when the team is losing.
- Copes with criticism - fair or unfair.
- Clever enough to take care of his body. Can find time to relax and recover in equal amounts.
- Has the games-playing and social intelligence to be part of the team performance. Understands the need for social cohesion within the team.
- Never loses the enjoyment and fun part of playing football. When all other incentives are considered, love of the game still remains the key to player commitment.

Professional players are ordinary people with ordinary problems who are extraordinary for 90 minutes on Saturday.

### **The complete player - social management**

A great player must have fire in the belly and ice in the head. It's talent that gets you there; it's character that keeps you there.

- Emotion and execution go hand in hand - for players and coaches. The coach must be a role model on the sideline.
- Must teach emotional aspects of performance:
  - Preparation for emotional surges - no surprises.

- Self-control - thoughts controlling feelings/mental toughness (Manchester United believes United always scores).
- Body-control - breathing, calm.
- Ball-control - no loss of rhythm, technique.
- Energy control - stay in high, positive zone.
- Insulate players from distractions; maintain focus.
- Key to playing away matches is beating the environment as much as other team.
- Organization/administration is important to avoid conflict.
- Communication/counseling is important in allowing personal feelings to be raised and discussed.
- Reaction to errors key; never make one mistake into two.
- Keep self-talk positive at all times.
- Teach players to stay in the now, avoid the guilt of the past or the hopes of the future.

The past is history, the future a mystery, the present is a gift; that's why we call it a "present."

### **Performance follows attitude**

#### **Relationships**

- Good relationships are based on:
  - Regular communication - it is essential in coaching women.
  - Openness.
  - Trust - must share feelings.
  - A good slice of humor - watch the movie "Slapshot" for a few laughs.
  - Transition skills.

#### **Physical readiness**

- Look good, feel good, play good  
*The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego - Freud*
- No doubts about fitness, strength, energy potential.
- No lifestyle problems - diet, rest and recovery.
- No injury concerns.
- No potential burn-out concerns - "a game too far."

*The harder we prepare, the harder it is to surrender - Vince Lombardi*

#### **Personal responsibility**

- Personal and team goals to be achieved: Is the goal the correct goal? Is it realistic? Examine this process carefully.
- Good work ethic and prepared well. Have you put the work in?
- Courage to face the challenge; break out of the "comfort zone."
- Commitment - "excellence is a choice."
- Willingness to keep learning.

The greatest quality of the greatest player is humility - *Arrigo Saaci*

- Coping skills; deal with change, pressure, criticism.
- Resilience; can change negatives into positives.
- Accountability; accepts ownership of the outcome.

### **Game significance**

- The psychology of results:
  - Last three games - W-W-W - confidence (potential complacency).
  - Last three games - L-L-L - anxiety (potential choking).
- Similar experience is a key factor; "another day at the office."
- Beating the environment - familiarization and routine; use videos to create the environment you are going into.
- Leaders in the dressing room.
- Embrace and enjoy the challenge - no fear.
- Good habits, consistency of performance.
- Focus on process, not outcome.

### **Coaching reminders**

- Don't drive love out of the game for the players.
- Players need time to make the transition from real life to practice; create a "change zone."
- Derby County - don't let the dips kill you; don't get out of control.
- There are soldiers and artists on every team. Try to get balance between them. Sell the artists on their ability.
- The weaker the leadership within the team, the stronger the coaching staff needs to be.
- Know how to deal with losses.
- Coach can arouse, but do it carefully.
- Halftime is the time to reload.
- Postgame is a time to watch for passion; no recriminations.
- Postgame questions: Was preparation for match correct? Did I pick the right players? Have them in the right positions? Was our shape right? Did halftime help or hurt us? What could we have done differently?

### **Conclusion**

One key to coaching is getting athletes to get out of their own way. Players need to define their own goals. They need also to get their minds out of the way and let their bodies work. Finally, if all aspects of coaching are done correctly, the idea is for the team to take ownership and deal with the major aspects of the game themselves.

*Editor's note: Bill Beswick is a former coach of the English National Basketball Team. He also has worked with the English Football Association's U-18 and U-21 national soccer teams as a sports psychologist. He currently is working with Derby County and assists other English teams.*