

Mental Conditioning in Youth Football

By: Coach Jack Gregory

I am not an expert or specialized in sports psychology in any way but I have researched the subject of mental conditioning for three years. After fourteen years of coaching football and eight of those coaching youth football along with twelve years of being a Marine and ten of those training Marines in some capacity I feel I can offer some experience and knowledge that I have acquired in this area as it applies to youth football. One of the major reasons that so many youth football teams fail is a complete lack of mental toughness and conditioning on the part of the coaching staff. Coaches will spend literally hours of training by season's end working on "physical conditioning" and then wonder why their teams quit on them in a tough game or situation. It is often no surprise to me when I talk to them about their practice regime and what they do to develop mental conditioning that their team failed. We as coaches must understand that we have to teach our kids how to handle pressure and stressful situations.

Mental Toughness

I have defined Mental Toughness as the ability to maintain a high level of concentration, confidence, and motivation while under stress and fatigue.

Dr. Lee Crust states that a mentally tough athlete has the below characteristics:

- Achieve relatively consistent performances regardless of situational factors;
- Retain a confident, positive, optimistic outlook, even when things are not going well, and not 'choke' under pressure;
- Deal with distractions without letting them interfere with optimal focus;
- Tolerate pain and discomfort; (remember pain is not an injury and it is important that an athlete understands the difference)
- Remain persistent when the 'going gets tough';
- Have the resilience to bounce back from disappointments.

Mental Conditioning

Mental Conditioning is defined as the ability to train and teach youth athletes to maintain concentration, confidence, and motivation while under stress and fatigue.

Being in the Zone

"Being in the Zone generally means being in a state in which your mind and body are working in harmony. You're calm yet energized, challenged yet confident, focused yet instinctive." (*Mayo Clinic staff*)

"The zone really refers to when you're performing automatically," says Aynsley Smith, Ph.D., a sports psychology consultant at the Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center,

Rochester, Minn. “It’s when you’re absolutely free of worries, free of inhibitions and so confident and relaxed that your best performance just kind of comes out automatically.”

So what does the zone mean for us as coaches? It simply means that when athlete’s skills (fundamentals) are well developed and well practiced they can stop concentrating on the needed skills (executing the skill) for an individual task and concentrate or focus on the task at hand. The skills become instinctual because as you practice and develop proper skills sets that the body remembers by developing neuromuscular patterns in the body. These patterns are nothing more than complex blueprints that the body uses to execute these skills. The more you practice them the more likely the body can execute them without concentration or thought.

Physical Training Develops Mental Conditioning

Proper physical training is a necessary part of mental conditioning. Actually a good physical training and conditioning program implements sound mental conditioning techniques and vice versa. Physical training is needed to program the CNS (Central Nervous System) and muscles so that they will remember and execute the correct neuromuscular commands for each movement or skill. This is the beginning phase of instinctive movement and the ability to get in the “Zone”.

So What Does This Mean

One major hang up I have with coaches that rep plays over and over again in practice is that they are not actually developing proper mental skills or basic movements skills like forward and lateral movement techniques which are fundamental to any sport. These basic movement fundamentals are often lacking and are why so many youth athletes lack good coordination, balance, speed, agility, and quickness. For example, without proper running/sprinting fundamentals a young athlete will never move at full speed and will appear slow when in fact if you just took the time to develop those fundamentals and then developed them to a point that they became instinctual that athlete would become a much more important piece in the overall scheme of your team. Also, one of the best ways to develop proper concentration and focus is to work on “simple skills” while forcing the player to concentrate on executing those skills correctly and quickly at first and then under duress and stress. As his skill level improves you can increase the speed of the drill and add additional situational problems to force the player to adapt. Running a play requires a complex set of skills and normally the young player does not have the proper concentration or focus skills necessary. To execute a play a young player must utilize skill such as concentrating on cadence, adjustment calls, technique, targets, location and never really develops basic concentration techniques needed to succeed in executing those complex skills. Coaches should first develop those basic concentration and focus skills by using techniques related to their positions and then as they improve in basic skills you can move on to complex skills (running plays). Remember as you develop these basic skills you have three options on increasing difficulty. These options are increase the length of time (not always good for limited practice time in team sports), increase intensity, or add a situational problem or distraction. It doesn’t take a long time

to develop these skills properly but it does take time and patience and knowledge on the coach's part. You don't have to be a psychologist or a mental toughness expert, but what you do need is a little knowledge on what to and not to do while coaching kids.

Some Physical Training Methods to Improve Mental Skills

- 1) Start with Simple skills at slow speed. (Keying on concentration on technique and focus on effort.)
- 2) Work on having the players execute the skills correctly. (Correct technique)
- 3) Increase speed, length, time, and intensity as they improve their skills. (as you see it become instinctual or natural as they perform the skills correctly increase one or two of these areas.)
- 4) Work on basic stances, sprint/running techniques, lateral movement techniques, tackling techniques, blocking techniques, and other simple skills like bear crawling and other multi-joint movement skills.
- 5) As their concentration levels increase and their skills become instinctual move on to more complex skills or adding additional environmental stressors. (blocking a live defender, tackling a live ball carrier, running with ball in a live situation).

When a player becomes confident in utilizing his basic skills he becomes less tentative and more aggressive and bold. This in turn breeds consistency regardless of outside factors.

Mental Training of Youth Football Players (Keeping your focus)

Some experts will tell you that developing mental toughness in young athletes is a waste of time. I disagree for the simple fact that science has already proven that the younger you start developing proper training techniques the more likely those athletes will develop into superior athletes compared to their peers who get very little or no training at all in these areas. The key is doing it at a proper level in comparison to the athlete you train. I have trained Marines all the way down to six year olds and they all require different types and methods of mental conditioning. Not only is it a maturity level but an individual issue as well. When you're training your team you need to be ready to apply various techniques so you can cover a broad range of personalities and traits.

Mental training covers the increasing of concentration, focus, controlling emotions, relaxing, maintaining a high energy level, being positive, being calm in the face of pressure, being confident, and finding a positive challenge in what you do.

Mental Training Techniques for Youth Football

As the coach of a youth football team you have to understand you set the tempo and demeanor of your team. Whatever you do the kids under you will feed off it and mimic it. If you respond to challenges or problems in a negative manner they will in turn do the same thing. If you become agitated in the face of stress or pressure so will they. You set

the tone and you must be the example for your team. This is not easy but you can teach your team some very valuable lessons while following these examples.

- 1) Learn to relax in the face of stress. During drills if your unit is struggling or a particular player is struggling take a step back and work on basics. Have everyone take a few deep breaths, tell a joke, and remind them to relax when they start struggling.
- 2) While performing drills, bird dogging or executing plays have them start with just a simple Imagery drill. Have them close their eyes and then you walk through the progression and have them imagine themselves executing it as you build the picture in their mind. Then execute it and repeat the exercise a few times. Tell them to do the same thing as they are waiting their turn are just before a snap. Mental imagery and rehearsal is a very powerful tool. The body actually will fire the proper neuromuscular patterns just as if they were executing the drill. Meaning that as they mentally rehearse a sequence (like Wedge blocking, SAB blocking, and Tackling) they are in fact developing those neuromuscular pathways just as if they were doing it on the field. The key is to teach them to rehearse it correctly over and over. This simple drill also helps to increase concentration, confidence, and focus.
- 3) Goal Setting increases motivation because your team, unit, and players have a specific reason to be successful. It provides the coach the ability to challenge players and it allows you to build confidence as they reach those goals. Some good examples are being able to run a wedge for ten yards, execute an SAB block for 5 yards, run a play to one side perfectly ten times in a row. A goal should be challenging, manageable, and measurable. This is a very good way of awarding helmet stickers by the way.
- 4) Positive Thinking is a must when you're coaching. Negative thoughts can affect concentration, focus, and confidence. Things like "Don't miss that tackle" or "Don't miss that block" usually cause the exact thing there attempting to stop from happening. This starts with your coaching techniques. Instead of applying negative coaching techniques apply positive coaching techniques. "Make that tackle like this....." or "Execute your blocks correctly." The use of positive terminology will go a long way to improving confidence and concentration in your team.

Applying These Concepts

Lets take a look at that list that Dr Crust spoke about and apply some of these techniques on live field situations.

- 1) Achieve relatively consistent performances regardless of situational factors;
 - First start with simple skills and situational factors – Wedge blocking progression is a good example.
 - Talk, Chalk, Walk, Run a play.
 - As your running a play add situations into the drill. Begin with a simple execution to get timing and technique down. Once that is master then

select specific situations to work on as well. Some examples – Opening series, excesses flags from referees, missing a key player or players, position on field, behind with limited time (2 minute drill), and goal line.

- Use poor weather when it is present. Rain, wind, cold, and heat all are going to be present during a game and you must utilize them when they are on hand.
- 2) Retain a confident, positive, optimistic outlook, even when things are not going well, and don't 'choke' under pressure;
 - The coach and staff should set the example first.
 - Present situational stressors and additional pressure and then teach your team how to handle it positively with confidence. Remember you set the example.
 - Have parents act as referees and signal them to make a penalty call as your running plays. Put pressure on the team and then show them how to keep focused and concentrate on the task at hand.
 - 3) Deal with distractions without letting them interfere with optimal focus;
 - Again you as a coach must be an example. When you face a distraction use it as a tool to teach your team how to remain focused.
 - Present simple distractions to the team as they are executing plays or drills and stay on them about remaining focused on the drill.
 - 4) Tolerate pain and discomfort; (remember pain is not an injury and it is important that an athlete understands the difference)
 - This is where good physical conditioning and endurance training comes into play.
 - Start with simple short distance, short duration, and simple skill and then add distance, difficulty, and time. Work for fatigue and discomfort as they improve and coach them to concentrate on execution and focus on completion.
 - 5) Remain persistent when the 'going gets tough';
 - Utilize tough moments in a scrimmage or set up 'tough' moments and then work on pushing through them as a team. 4th and goal with several penalties is a good example. Defense having to walk back on the field after offense turns over ball and the opponent just scored on offense. These are moments that you should discuss and work on.
 - During conditioning present tough challenges and obstacles and coach them to stay persistent and push through.
 - 6) Have the resilience to bounce back from disappointments.
 - As above set up situations that put disappointments in the face of the unit and then coach them to push through that disappointment and focus on the finish and concentrate on the execution.
 - As the coach you set the tempo and the demeanor. You should cover every situation that might occur on the field and go over them so that your team is prepared for them. From simple penalties to being behind with limited time to a serious injury on your team.

In Conclusion

Remember as the coaching and coaching staff you set the demeanor and the standard of your team. Utilize mental conditioning techniques throughout your training environment and maximize your physical conditioning elements with sound mental conditioning training to improve your teams mental toughness. A team that is not only physically tough but also mentally tough will win a lot of games. During the 2004 Summer Olympics an announcer commented on the fact that all of the Olympians are at the same level of physical ability it is their level of mental toughness that separate the elite athletes to the rest. By starting early and teaching these techniques to our young athletes now they will be able to strive for a higher level of performance with the right attitude.

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