

PSYCH FOR RUGBY

INTRODUCTION

It is important to remember that the psych involved in rugby is certainly no substitute for active and physical training sessions.

The psych in rugby does not begin in the change rooms thirty minutes prior to the game, with the coach telling his players to go out there and destroy the opposition. Rugby psych is much more complex than this and perhaps a coach can go through the entire season thinking that he never got his players to reach their full potential and to play as a unit.

Rugby is a team game with 15 players plus reserves, therefore to have a team function at the best of their ability week in and week out it is important for the coach to have more than just a good technical knowledge about the game.

During a season the rugby coach experiences many different identities. The coach is a teacher, trainer, psychologist, disciplinarian, friend, planner, motivator, student, communicator and the list goes on. Because of the many coaching identities it is of vital importance that the coach has a good, open and honest relationship with his players. The essence of this relationship and perhaps a very successful season is built on respect for each other.

The psychology of any sport or competitor is extremely complex and for the game of rugby which is complex in itself makes matters even more difficult for the coach.

The following topics covered in this paper will provide the coach with numerous ideas and essential information required to have players reach their potential and work to achieve a desired outcome.

PLAYER PROFILE.

“Rugby, when analysed as an athletic task is highly complex. It is an open skill sport based on action and reaction, demanding adjustments to ever changing external conditions. Its numerous single tasks require complex motor skills, sometimes with maximum power, speed and endurance while at other times, subtle, fine motor co-ordination, rhythm are of the essence.”---- (Dr Ian Lynagh)

Dr. Ian Lynagh’s definition of Rugby emphasises the importance of having the perfect combination of physical and mental attributes for the athlete to be successful.

It is important for the coach to understand what motivates a player, what his goals are, etc. Therefore it is suggested a “Player Profile” be completed by each player at the beginning of the season. (Appendix 1)

The Player Profile provides the coach with essential information by having players identify specific aspects relevant to the game. These include:

- What do you hope to achieve in Rugby?
- What are your Rugby goals for this year?
- What are your personal goals for this year?
- What do you identify as your playing strengths?
- What do you identify as areas where improvement is necessary?
- What do you expect from other players in the team?
- What do you expect from the coaching staff?

The information provided from the Player Profile can be extremely beneficial for the coach for the following reasons:

- Understand and appreciate the reasons why the athlete is playing rugby.
- Have a brief knowledge of the players personal background. (eg. Job, family, etc)
- Identify similar personality traits (eg. competitiveness) and group individuals in certain training environments such as games and one on one or two on two situations.
- Leadership qualities.
- Enables players to identify their own strengths and weaknesses.
- The profile acts as a developmental tool for the player.
- Action plans can be initiated

To achieve success from the Player Profile it is important that the coach and player re-assess and evaluate the information at regular intervals during the season. (eg. Monthly)

The coach also needs to provide further direction for the player, therefore the player profile should be reviewed and used as a draft for the coach and player to discuss and set individual rugby specific goals.

GOAL SETTING

THIS IS THE STRONGEST HUMAN FORCE FOR SELF MOTIVATION.

A goal is simply something that you set for yourself, and then strive to achieve it. Most people set goals for themselves, either personal, career oriented or sport oriented. The goals that you set must be realistic, measurable, specific and attainable to achieve their purpose. Goals provide self satisfaction and motivation when they are achieved.

Goals provide focus, give direction, and help people to realise their aspirations.

Using the player profiles the coach can draw some common similarities to establish team goals. The team goals for the year should be established at a team meeting and regarded as a partnership between coach and players, as this allows players ownership of the team and their destiny.

With regards to rugby it is best to categorise goals under three headings:

1. LONG TERM GOALS:

- eg. Team Goal. -To win the premiership
 Individual Goal. -“I want to be selected in the state rep. team.”
 These can often be dreams !
 The bigger the goal, the more effort is required.
 These goals can be as far as 5 years into the future.

2. SEASONAL GOALS :

- eg. Team Goal. -Win every home game.
 Individual Goal. -Attend every training session.
 These are “testing goals” to ensure you are on track to achieving your
 long term goal.

3. SHORT TERM GOALS :

- eg. Team Goal. -To maintain possession.
 Individual Goal. -Not to miss a tackle during this game.
 These are your immediate goals or plans.
 What am I going to achieve this year, this month, this week, this game.

Short term goals must be interlinked with the seasonal and long term goals; they provide the stepping stones to your dream.

The coach may choose to outline the team goals at the training sessions prior to the game, so as players understand and work towards achieving them. As well as the team achieving their goals for the game it is important and of great motivational value for the athlete to set individual goals for every game.

A maximum of three (3) team goals per game is adequate, as any more may result in decreased performance in skill as a consequence of too many mental cues. (overload)

Regular meetings with the players to evaluate their goals and review information from player profiles should be conducted by the coach. The advantage of this is twofold:

1. The players will see the coach taking a personal interest in their performance.
2. Ensures the player is focused on achieving his goals.

The organised and planned coach that emphasises the importance of goal setting to his players and continually evaluates his players progress will achieve favourable results. For the well focused team that understands and appreciates the importance and relevance of goal setting, an interesting concept for the coach to initiate would be a “game goals board”.

The “game goals board” concept involves a white/black board located in the team change room, where by the team goals for the game are writtern in big bold letters for all to see. Also included on this board are the numbers 1 - 15 marked down the board with two (2) lines available for the respective player to list two (2) individual goals for the game. (Appendix 2)

The purpose of the “game goals board” is to outline and reinforce the team goals to the players and also commit each player to strive to achieve individual goals for each game, thus encouraging players to engage the brain on their arrival into the dressing room.

The “game goals board” provides many benefits to the coach. These include:

- Reinforces team goals.
- Goals are player developed.
- Goals are position specific.
- Goals are relevant to the environment and the conditions.
- Provides criteria for players to assess their own performance.
- Feedback can be immediate.

MOTIVATION

Rugby coaches should be concerned about the performance of individuals and the team as a whole. Player and team improvement is usually a result of the physical training sessions or the tactics employed by the coach.

However, talent and skill are enhanced dramatically when motivated to use it.

“Performance = (fitness + Skill) x Motivation (mental preparation)”
RJP. Marks.

Motivation is aimed at “developing specific behaviours in an individual to a point where he will adhere to them consistently with a decreasing need for rewards.” RJP. Marks.

For this reason, the coach needs to identify and understand the reasons for the athlete participating in rugby, as this provides the athlete with inspiration.

Fear and reward play an integral part in most motivational exercises. (eg. the promise of promotion or demotion)

“The tendency to approach success = **motivation** to achieve success + probability of success + incentive value of success”
RJP. Marks

Motivation for the coach may mean having to change or improve the players behaviour in terms of;

- Standard behaviour- eg. attending training on time, following diet instructions, etc.
- Skill behaviour- eg. improve technical aspects,
- Striving behaviour- eg. run faster, jump higher,

The player profile and goal setting meetings provide the coach with the necessary information required to motivate players. The coach has already identified the reason(s) for the player wanting to compete and the following strategies can be implemented to improve and maintain motivation:

- Cross training - for variety and to reduce boredom.
- Frequency/Intensity relationship - adaptations of players.
- Avoid over-training.
- Training partners - one who has similar goals.
- Motivation cues - words, phrases, etc.
- Questioning - player input and challenges.

The coach does not have time to keep up all forms of reinforcement, therefore gradually hand over this job to the player and his peers but do not make it obvious or predictable. Also encourage self reinforcement as it is more powerful and always available.

Internal or self-motivation is the driving force that pushes one to achieve. A coach should be able to identify what drives a player and this is of great importance with respect to training sessions, matches, leadership qualities and responsibilities. This driving force may be the fear of failure or the feel of success with winning or doing your best. It is imperative to encourage this behaviour as the coach or crowd or captain cannot always provide the necessary motivation.

External motivation comes from the outside, eg, the coach's applause or feedback, a trophy, the crowd.

Both types of motivation can be either positive or negative. The coach should attempt to encourage or promote the positive while at the same time turn the negative around to achieve positive outcomes.

It is important for the coach to realise that not all players compete for the same reasons. Therefore, in the short term winning or losing is not always the most relevant factor. Rugby is a team game and thus the coach is likely to have players do their absolute best and still lose, or play well and win, or play badly and still win.

Ultimately a player performs well to please himself and thus the greatest source of motivation comes from within. A coach should encourage his players to take responsibility for motivating themselves through self talk (positive), goal setting and visualisation.

AROUSAL LEVELS

Arousal levels and performance have a very close relationship. The player and the coach must be aware of this relationship and find the medium, so as all players are aroused and still perform to their best.

Arousal refers to the degree of mental and physical energy release by a player

Arousal levels can vary from being half asleep through to high anxiety. Performance is affected negatively when arousal is too low, (eg. boredom, lethargy, complacency) or too high.(eg. over aggressive, muscle tension, poor concentration)

The training session is the ideal place for the coach and players to focus on arousal levels. Training must be well planned, exciting and challenging for the player to reach his optimum level.

-High pressure drills interspersed with brief calming routines, (eg. return to start of drill in a group performing inside support passes, rugby tennis, etc.) assist players to control their arousal levels in pressure situations.

-Key words or verbal cues can be used by the coach and player to help find the optimum level of arousal. (eg. feet, square, hands, ball)

-Routines during training or prior to the match are a good way of controlling anxiety, concentration and arousal levels.

Ultimately, the athlete must accept responsibility for controlling his own arousal levels, however the coach can certainly assist the athlete to find the successful medium. Also the coach should be familiar with arousal levels for different athletes and be able to identify signs of inappropriate arousal.

Relationship between arousal and performance.

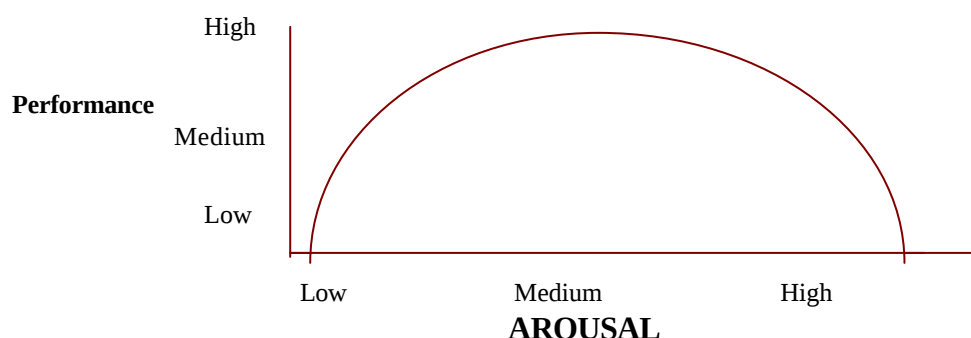


DIAGRAM 1

Diagram 1 presents the “inverted U” theory of arousal - performance relationship. Low arousal produces low performance. As the arousal increases the competence of the performance improves, until it reaches an optimal performance level.

Further to this, arousal also affects the breadth of the attention field of the athlete. The more aroused the athlete, the more narrow the scope of his attention. This has significance for the variety of positions in a rugby team.

MENTAL REHEARSAL

“IT IS MOST LIKELY THAT ATHLETES WHO TRAIN AND PERFORM MENTAL REHEARSAL CONSISTENTLY WILL ACHIEVE HIGHER LEVELS THAN ATHLETES WHO ONLY TRAIN”

Mental rehearsal involves picturing an image in your mind with the desired performance outcome.

It helps the player to learn skills quickly while confidence and concentration are enhanced.

Mental rehearsal is a learned skill. The athlete needs to learn how to do it plus the content to be included.

The training session is the ideal place to learn mental rehearsal; the coach must continually place his players under stress or match conditions.

There are some crucial features that must be followed for mental rehearsal to be successful:

- *-The mental rehearsal should take place in the performance environment. (when possible)*

The players and the team must be familiar with the playing arena for the imagery and visualisation to be accurate.

- *-The skill must be performed in its entirety.*

eg. the goal kicker must be confident with the entire skill or movement, not just the approach to the ball because he is now unfamiliar with the contact and follow through and the result.

- *-The rehearsal must be successful.*

The visualisation of mistakes will increase the likelihood of mistakes.

All mental rehearsals should be positive and successful. This takes practice.

Mental rehearsal does work and there is certainly a place for it in rugby. In a game that caters for all body types with varying levels of skill and different roles for each position it is a way of having your players understand their roles and duties more precisely.

GAME PREPARATION

If a team has put the hard work in it does not necessarily mean they are ready for the game. World champions can prepare themselves on the day of the event regardless of where and how they slept to perform well. Some players believe their performance is related to the way they felt when they awoke or arrived at the venue.

The two most important aspects of game preparation are planning and routine. These include organising your kit, eating and sleeping habits, mental and physical preparation on the day prior and the day of competition.

GAME PREPARATION refers to:

- **regardless of the distance travelled,**
 - **regardless of the ground and weather conditions,**
 - **regardless of the opposition,**
 - **regardless of**
- each player is ready to perform to his potential.**

Routines such as strapping, jersey distribution, and the warm up assists each player to prepare himself for the game, regardless of the level of competition.

Players should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own personal preparation. They may require some assistance in learning to identify the nature of the ready state and some procedures for managing pre-game anxiety.

Coaches play a major role in assisting players with preparation and developing procedures to attain the “readiness state” and to provide an environment to facilitate its happening.

The use of key words is very effective for maintaining intensity and concentration. However it is important that the words are familiar to the players, therefore it is suggested that key words be regularly used at training.

At all levels a game can be decided before the kick off. One team is capable of “psyching out” the other to such an extent that it usually means they have a great advantage before taking the field. This advantage might come in the form of;

- your team dressed in a uniform,
- your team walking around together,
- your motivated and enthusiastic warm up
- the confidence oozing from your players,
- and many more depending on venues, etc.

The psych does not end at the conclusion of the game. Regardless of the result the confidence and presentation of the team at after match function etc, are of vital significance for the on going success of your team and a gentle reminder to the opposition.

CONCLUSION

There are two psychological components of being ready to play rugby, as identified by Dr. Ian Lynagh.

1. The Content Component.- “This refers to the knowledge of the sports task to be performed. This includes knowing the skills techniques, moves, positional plays, options etc with an overall idea encompassed in a game plan.” (Dr Ian Lynagh)

This component is knowing what you want to do and is best associated with training that consists of basic skills being put together to make up moves that are performed automatically through an action / reaction or key word.

To confirm and reinforce a game plan, two or three key ideas which trigger off the important aspect of the plan should be established and used during the last training session before the match. These key ideas are then used on game day and during the pre-game talk.

2. The Process Component.- “This refers to the physical and psychological states in which an athlete best performs the tasks of the game plan. This includes the obvious need for players to tune mind and body to a state of readiness. This is the major business of preparation on the game day, and especially in the locker room.” Dr. Ian Lynagh

The pre-game preparation involves establishing appropriate mental and emotional states, a relevant attentional focus with a level of physical arousal conducive to the sports task.

This paper has identified several aspects relevant to the mental preparation and ‘Psych’ of playing Rugby. Physical and mental preparation of an athlete is a progressive coaching task and requires strategic planning for substantial benefits to be gained.

The ‘Psych for Rugby’ or any team sport is perhaps one of the most complex coaching challenges, because the coach is consistently dealing with different personalities. For this reason alone it is suggested the coach progressively educates his players on the topics mentioned in this paper and avoids bombarding them with unnecessary and irrelevant information.

References.

Lynagh, I. (1989) Mental Preparation for High Performance Rugby.
(South Pacific Coaches Conference - Brisbane.)

Marks, R.J.P. (1986) National Rugby Union Coaching Plan. The 2nd Decade.
Level 2 Manual. Rothmans Foundation.

PLAYER PROFILE

NAME:.....
ADDRESS:
.....
PHONE NO:.....
PARENTS/WIFE NAME:
OCCUPATION/COURSE:
PREFERRED POSITION: 1.
2.

What are your three (3) main goals for Rugby this year?

1.
2.
3.

What are your playing strengths and how can they contribute to the teams success?

1.
2.
3.

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What area in your game would you like to improve?

1.
2.
3.

What personal qualities can you bring to the team to ensure a successful and enjoyable season? (eg. leadership, discipline)

1.
2.
3.

What are your expectations of the coaching staff and fellow players to ensure the season is successful?

- Coaches: 1.
 2.
 3.
- Players: 1.
 2.
 3.

NB. Changes should be made to the player profile to cater for the specific needs of the age group and grade of rugby.

“TEAM GOALS BOARD”

TEAM GOALS

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

INDIVIDUAL GOALS

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ARU LEVEL III
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“PSYCH
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Presented by: Anthony Eddy