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PLAY BETTER FOOTBALL

KICK-OFF WITH CONFIDENCE

Success on the football pitch is not all about silky skills and hard tackles. These days, sports psychologists hone the mental skills of players before they even get their kit on. *Sport* consulted one – Sam Kotadia, now working with Charlton Athletic – for his top mental strategies for a trophy-winning season.



- 1 **PREPARATION IS KEY**
One of the most effective ways to optimise your time during the build-up to a competitive performance is to follow a pre-match routine. It organises your activities before performances, allowing you to maximise your chances of performing well. It also helps you to develop an attention to detail that encourages you to examine all components of your sporting performance.
- 2 **KEEP IN SHAPE**
A healthy body and a healthy mind are intrinsically linked. Research has shown that levels of concentration drop significantly when you are tired. By making sure that you keep in shape, you prevent fatigue from setting in, which can cause you to lose focus. So regular training will not only improve your body, but your mind as well.
- 3 **RELAXED EXCELLENCE**
Often during a heated battle on the football pitch there is a danger of trying too hard to gain an edge over your competitors. Whenever this happens you are likely to tighten up, and consequently your technique becomes restricted, losing its fluidity. Aim your efforts between under and over-trying, and you will obtain an optimal level of performance.
- 4 **GET CHEERLEADING**
Everyone loves to be encouraged. In a team sport you can boost the morale and the confidence of your teammates by praising and complimenting their contributions. Emotions are contagious, and by getting your teammates into a positive state, their feelings will feed back to you. Group hug, anyone?
- 5 **START AGAIN, SIMPLY**
Setbacks are inevitable in the competitive arena, and it is important that you react well to them. After making a mistake, start again simply. This increases the probability of a successful completion, helping to erase any negative effect the initial mistake may have had. Making two mistakes in a row can leave you short of confidence, so always follow an error with a simple execution.
- 6 **THE MAGIC OF MUSIC**
The use of music is a commonly applied strategy to get pumped up before performances. Individually or as a team exercise, compile a mix of motivational songs. 'Eye of the Tiger' by Survivor and 'Song 2' by Blur are popular choices but everyone has their own personal favourites so don't try to impose your tastes on others, or the team unification could rapidly disappear.
- 7 **MOVE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION**
One of the biggest predictors of success is direction. By setting yourself or your team match-goals and devising targets you streamline your focus towards continued progress. Before performances, set yourself three or more targets to achieve during matches, and afterwards review how effective you were at reaching them.
- 8 **THE POWER OF PROCESS**
Everyone in sport wants to win. But by only focusing on the desired outcome you can damage your performance. It creates pressure and causes you to forget how to win. Focus on the processes behind winning. In football, some of these key processes may include 'keeping your head up' and 'being first to the ball.' By focusing on the ingredients of success, winning becomes a natural by-product.
- 9 **THE FUN FACTOR**
One of the biggest predictors of how well you perform on the pitch is how you feel. By being positive and generating a resourceful internal state, you increase your chances of playing your best football. Focusing on the enjoyment of playing football will maintain your enthusiasm and zest for the game.
- 10 **LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES**
To keep improving as a footballer you must learn from your mistakes. To help you do this, get into the habit of objectively evaluating your game after matches. Write down three or more aspects of your performance that you can improve on for next time. If you struggle to think of anything, ask a teammate. If you are brave enough to hear the truth, of course. ☺