

PSYCHOLOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR COACHING PERFORMANCE.

At the 2007 RFU International Coaching Conference, a lecture was delivered on this topic by Dr. Neil Weston from the Department of Sport & Exercise Science at the University of Portsmouth. He had worked on the topic with a colleague, Dr. Richard Thelwell.

John Widdowson, Manager of the Nottingham Rugby Academy, Level 3 coach and an RFU Tutor, West Midlands, wrote up a summary of the lecture and it is interspaced in italics with information from the Powerpoint presentation that accompanied the talk.

In today's society the hectic life most people have and the demands placed upon us has meant that we have become all too aware of stress and the impact it has on individuals; many corporate businesses have invested in strategies that help employees both recognise and reduce this.

Neil Weston and his colleagues have recently conducted research in this area, but with particular emphasis on the sources and impacts of stress in professional sports coaches. Whilst a great deal of research had been conducted on athlete stress, Neil and his colleagues appreciate that coaches are performers too and that they very often have to deal with a variety of stressors so that they can perform well.

AIMS:

- *To identify where coach stress comes from.*
- To highlight what impact stress may have on coach performance.
- To provide some strategies to help coaches overcome the negative impacts of stress.

We as coaches are always conscious of what are players are trying to do and what they are feeling. As part of our role we endeavour to provide emotional support, encouragement and advice if necessary.

In providing all this for our players in a very competitive and performance-orientated environment, what is the toll on the coaches? Are we so absorbed in our players and their needs that we never consider the toll it may have upon us?

From the beginning, it was Neil's intention to make this as interactive as possible for those present, which would allow coaches to acknowledge that stress is as significant for the coaches as well as the players.

Why is this an important area for coaches to consider?

- Stress is normally disruptive to what you are trying to achieve.
- Athletes are likely to pick up on the coach being stressed.



- If stress is not controlled, then it is a hard cycle to break awareness of strategies to control/cope is required.
- So what stress do you experience, where does it come from and what impact does it have?

It was quite clear in the presentation, that irrespective of whichever role the common denominator is, stress is normally disruptive to what you are trying to achieve.

The coach is pivotal in many areas of the team and, in doing all that is expected, he may be unaware of the stress generated and the impact that this has on the players and the individual. Neil, in presenting his knowledge and research in the area, focused on three key areas; stressors, impact of the stressors and appropriate coping strategies.

We are all individuals and, though the stressors themselves may be common, the order in which they create the most stress will be pertinent to the individual. Some of the common stressors identified by the conference candidates were: selection, time, parent involvement and board/chairman involvement.

Stress sources:

- *Performance of athletes (Coachability/preparation/competitive performance).*
- Performance of self and demands on self in training and before, during and after competition.
- Environment, especially regarding training, competition, selection, travel and finances.
- The organisation and your leadership pertaining to board level, other coaches and the level of the athletes you are dealing with.
- Personal issues private life, social life and professional (contractual) matters.
- Team issues.

The impact of these stressors on our behaviours was also far-reaching: Anger, frustration, guilt, nerves, and energy-sapping were common refrains. The list generated by the candidates not only raised awareness of the subject, but also provided a reminder of the impact that stress can have on individuals.

Impacts of stress:

- *Self Inappropriate thoughts? Negative emotions? Poor behaviours?*
- *Others Communication? Impression created?*
- Squad Avoid the coach? Increased athlete stress? Fluctuating motivation/confidence?

Research examples:

• "We had a team watched two or three times and we analysed them down to the last minute and exactly what they were going to do and exactly what I wanted us to do ... right on cue they made this run and I knew they were going to do it because I had seen them do it and we didn't defend it or even make nearly the right decision. That's stressful!"



- "You dread your key players getting injured ...especially the ones who make things tick for you or the ones that do special things in a game you can't do anything about it, but when you lose your big players it certainly creates headaches."
- "The main stress is the amount of money we have. What is the budget? Do we have to release players to get new ones in? It is difficult because we can't just say we want so-and-so and get him/them. On that, I hate telling players that we no longer need them I get stressed about it and feel really guilty and responsible, but it has to be done."
- "Of course coaches have differences in opinions. I don't mind that, but when the players see us against one another, then that is another problem altogether."

The appropriate coping strategies, in my opinion, would be individualised but the main point that was made was – **Control the controllables!** Focus only on those aspects within your control and forget about the rest, as there is no use worrying about things you have no influence over.

Overcoming and controlling stress?

- If coaches know that stress is there and that it can have negative impacts, can they control it?
- Do coaches know how to cope with stress?
- Do coaches have any strategies to enable coping?

Coping strategies for stress?

• Can you control the stressor?

If no: Do you need to rationalise your thoughts? Try to control the controllables. If yes: There is a need for cognitive strategies, such as self-talk, thought suppression, countering, rationalisation, visualisation and goal-setting. There will be a need to employ appropriate behavioural strategies such as relaxation, development of consistent routines and role play. Seeking support from others and delegating responsibilities will be crucial.

Those who attended this workshop, if they had never before considered the stress experienced in the world of coaching, were provided with a presentation full of insight into the problem, which encouraged self-reflection and identification of those things we may have taken for granted as being normal when they may not be - and might have had a significant impact on us and, ultimately, our players.

Food for thought:

Be aware of:

- *The potential stressors and where they come from.*
- The potential impacts of your stress.
- Whether you can control your stress.
- How you can cope with your stress.



Those who attended the presentation have been provided with information that they can utilise to assist them in managing their coaching lives a little better. If coaches recognise the causes and symptoms of stress, they will be in a better position to manage those stressors better through the variety of strategies offered in the talk. This, in turn, should provide continued enjoyment in a high-pressure environment by assisting in the process of reducing burnout within the coaching fraternity.