

“Luke, use the force”

Star Wars was a very popular series of movies and had an exciting storyline. Throughout the story, learning to use “the force” was a constant theme. The Jedi master Yoda, teaches that the force flows through us and is a natural internal source of power. The “force” allows us to focus our energies and to peak our abilities. To be a Jedi knight one needs to master fear and control anger. This fictional account of the force contains important truths about the human psyche about how emotion and thoughts can control behavior. Why is this important for players? Emotional control is critical to maximize and focus abilities. We call this “force” the mental side of the game. You are all familiar with the components of soccer. We spend a great deal of time on the tactics and techniques of soccer. The psychological component is unusual because of how little we say we practice mental skills. This is not really true. We use mental skills as we warm up, talk to teammates, understand the coaching, run through a session and learn new skills. We can’t separate our mental selves from our physical selves.

Who benefits from mental skills?

Both players and coaches can benefit from learning new mental skills. The great thing about mental skills is that you can use the mental toughness you learn in soccer and apply it to school, home or work. People of all ages can learn the mental skills. Coaches, players, parents and administrators can all learn to harness their potential and “use the force”. It’s a mistake to think we only need help when something goes wrong. Mental skills are a basic building block of good health, happy relationships productive work and soccer excellence. You can always learn new skills and take a step toward excellence.

How much of soccer is mental?

Many coaches attribute mental skills to as much as 95% of the game. However when you ask, “what mental skills are you working on in practice”? Coaches often reply, “I just train them hard and hope they are motivated to win” That approach leaves too much to chance and will result in poor psychological preparation. As part of our search for excellence, your coaching director Gordon Miller has provided education opportunities for you to learn the mental side of the game. That’s where I come in to help and provide some expertise to produce a healthy and productive coaching environment. In this following series of articles, I will give you the nuts and bolts of the mental side of coaching and provide practical information you can use.

What is playing in the zone?

Let’s start with the joy that players bring to the field when they play “in the Zone”. You have heard this before, players dribbling the ball, making perfect moves, striking the winning goal after a brilliant move. Players talk about this great feeling, playing without pressure, skilled and strong. If we could coach players who always played in the Zone, life would be sweet. Players know it’s easy to compete when you have touch, your legs have jump and the play is easy. Runners call it a high, swimmers call it feel and soccer players call it playing with confidence. It’s called playing in the Zone. Players talk about the zone in similar ways;

“I was mentally clear, my body pumped and I felt like a wizard”

“Physically everything came to a peak my play just flowed.”

“I was confident and able to keep strong and tough when I needed it”

“I was in the zone, I wasn’t thinking of anything but my mark, nothing else mattered”

“I was completely focused, like my body and mind were in perfect harmony”

“I felt intense control and no one could touch me”

These players are describing playing in the zone. You have probably experienced this feeling while you are performing something you really like and are good at. The trick for coaches is to try to set the conditions for players to play in the zone daily. This is a difficult task but new scientific research indicates that we can teach and recreate the conditions for playing in the Zone. This is a really important concept for all coaches. We can teach players to “play in the Zone” People feel skilled and in control when they play in the Zone. This is how human motivation can work for you. If players are matched to the right level of skill and focused upon the task they will have some degree of control and competence. This idea of a player thinking they have control and competence is a key to entering the Zone. If the skill is too difficult the player chokes; too easy a skill and they are bored. When correct conditions are set up, players feel in control, competent and have a chance to enter the Zone. Playing here does something important. It gives motivational control to the player. That’s what we want as coaches, to help players to maximize intrinsic motivation.

Maximizing motivation

The most common question I receive from coaches is the how to motivate players. This is a huge topic and our second article we will explore the topic on maximizing motivation. When coaches set up the team structure, they are influencing how players will respond. When coaches set the team standards, goal setting, and mission statements and communicate their coaching philosophy, they are influencing the player’s ability to play in the zone. Motivation affects almost all of the choices a player makes. Training well daily, playing with confidence and improving skills consistently are the hallmarks of maximal motivation. If left untrained players practice poorly compete sporadically and have constant conflicts.

Developing mental toughness with players

In our third article, we will dig deeper into the concept of the self (Self-concept, self-esteem and self-confidence). We will investigate how coaches can teach techniques to develop a healthy and resilient self. If you were to ask, players, “Is you’re a coach positive or negative influence?” I almost always get the same answer, “My coach is way too negative and always too hard on us. It destroys my confidence”. If you to ask the coach the same question they would give the opposite response, “I try to be positive and help to players to improve, that’s coaching”. The reality is that the same situation affects people in different ways. Yes, how players interpret coaching affects the way they play. This perception is dependant on how people look at themselves or how they form their self image and self-concepts. Coaches are always trying to increase the demands upon players, that’s part of training. The best players have a high degree of psychological resiliency and that will be the focus for this article on developing the self.

Teaching emotional control

The forth article in our series will focus on the components of emotional control for the player. You have seen many fine players who practice well all week and then fall apart in the game situation. This is a common scenario and can be solved with a series of learned skills by learning to play in the zone. Coaches can teach players a tip from the pro’s by teaching a three-step focusing technique that allows for optimal readiness. This skill will allow players to find their individual preparation level and to focus their energies to the moment. This is a relaxation technique, coupled with a concentration technique, which players can use in a variety of situations. The final piece of three-step process is the skill of mental rehearsal or imagery. You have probably performed portions of this skill already and are aware of its power and utility. In this article, we will practice and adapt the skills Relaxation, Concentration, and Imagery to allow players to continue their journey toward success.

How does “ZONE TRAINING” improve my game?

As the coach, you are responsible for all aspects of the game. These psychological principles will help get you started into a healthy and productive coaching environment. This list of ZONE skills makes sense but you need to practice these skills as a daily component of your sessions. Working on mental skills is often overlooked when planning the training session but should really be integrated within the skills. The influences that affect Zone play will be different for each player so there is a critical need to identify individual coping skills. This may sound like a huge task but like all coaching, you can improve with time. This skill is often the difference between a novice coach and an expert coach.

By identifying these Zone skills you have begun to open your eyes to the psychological side of coaching and have taken a step into a larger universe. Soccer is the most complicated tactical game in the world with a eleven players and an infinite number of possibilities. This demand makes coaching challenging and playing complicated. Players must practice agility, dribbling, passing and tactical skills such as reading and reacting. Most of the “ZONE” skills are designed to improve awareness, control and mental toughness. It makes sense that if you enjoy training and competition you will become a better player, and perhaps be more successful. Being in the zone acts as kind of a magnet to motivate players to practice with higher skill, speed, and enjoyment. In short, we are all motivated to get into the zone again.

Now its Game Time

As always, talk is cheap and now its game time. Let’s see if you have learned from reading this article.

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|---|------|-------|
| 1. Playing in the Zone is a learned skill based on personal experience. | True | False |
| 2. Playing a to high a skill level can hurt your confidence. | True | False |
| 3. Mental Skills should only be practiced away from the field. | True | False |
| 4. Mental Skills are often overlooked when training in planned. | True | False |
| 5. Coaches can set the condition for players to play in the Zone. | True | False |

Answers 1=True 2=True 3=False 4=True 5=True

Dan Freigang is a sport scientist working with the U.S.S.F. in Sport Psychology. Dano travels the country doing clinics and workshops with clubs and individuals. Dano was an internationally ranked athlete and national team coach, He presents his skills as a unique blend of scientist and coach. He is currently in private practice and invites your comments and inquiries. Caldan@Earthlink.net (801) 392-4762