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Preparing for the World Cup

In June 2010 South Africa will host its very first World Cup. The country has already begun making preparations, and so have the athletes. The US must deal with extensive travel, a new cultural environment, new opponents and new style of play. How do they handle the pressure of world's biggest sporting event on another continent? Read on ...

Know that the World Cup is different ... expect the unexpected so you are ready to adapt to change

As a favorite to qualify from Group C, England Coach Fabio Capello said "Every team will have to meet awkward opponents, play in difficult conditions and win matches to win the World Cup ... I know from experience as a player that when you play here (in the FIFA World Cup™) the pressure is different and the mentality is different." Capello recognizes the importance of preparing for the unknown. Fortunately, so does US Coach, Bob Bradley who projected optimism when he said, "The (FIFA) Confederations Cup has given us a real feel for the venues and the weather that we'll experience in South Africa, so it will make for a good World Cup, I'm sure about that."

Focus on what you can control. Accept and deal with what you can't. Do this and your confidence will rise. Success will become more likely.

Many things can distract you from what is essential to perform your best. Many of them are important but out of your control, such as bad calls and field conditions. Even elite athletes have to be aware of when they choose to focus on the wrong thing. It is natural for your mind will focus on the uncontrollable threats (travel, outcomes, weaknesses, adversity), but mentally tough athletes will refocus onto their strengths. Notice how Coach Matjaz Kek goes back and forth between the two in the quote below:

- "I'm a bit disappointed, not in our opponents, but in the amount of travelling we'll have to do. We are a small country, but we have a big motivation and a lot of heart. It's not a case of us having nothing to lose; on the contrary, there could be three games which we could lose. There is always something at stake. We just hope that we can play well, but we do face an uphill struggle. Slovenia is the smallest country in this competition, but now we know what we have to do and what job we face."

Exploit Your Strengths

One key to mental toughness is consistently using your strengths to your advantage. Regardless of what other competitors do, know what skills and qualities you can rely on. Use them to gain an advantage. Fall back on them when you start to lose control of a match. Continue to develop them in practice so the advantage is even greater in competition.

Preparation

This may seem obvious, but it cannot be overstated. There is no greater confidence builder than preparing mentally, physically, tactically, and technically to the best of your ability. Confidence is the natural result of knowing you have done everything you can to succeed. Preparation can insulate you from fear of failure. In my experience, when an athlete has done all she can and loses anyway, she moves on from the loss more easily. There is a sense of accomplishment after having truly given all she had. There is a respect for the opponent who was better she was *on that day*. Rather than being negative or feeling like a "loser" – these athletes maintain their motivation and continue to work hard at improving for the next opportunity to win.

... These approaches will help Team USA in South Africa. And they will help you in your next competition.

References

<http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/standings/group=249725/quotes.html>