

In December 2005, a study was published by Richard Thelwell, Neil Weston, and Iain Greenlees of the United Kingdom entitled "**Defining and Understanding Mental Toughness within Soccer.**" A total of 49 professional male soccer players with international playing experience were interviewed. They defined mental toughness and its attributes:

Mental toughness is having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to:

- Always cope better than your opponents with the many demands (competition, training, lifestyle) that soccer places on the performer
- Specifically, be more consistent and better than your opponents in remaining *determined, focused, confident, and in control under pressure*

The most important attribute of mental toughness that stood out from the rest was:

- Having total self-belief at all times that you will achieve success

### Building Confidence

Ask any athlete, in any sport, at any level and s/he will tell you confidence is critical to success. Without it, the effort required to win is lacking. After all, why try if you don't think you can? Athletes who lack confidence often will try to avoid mistakes (thus increasing their focus on mistakes and making more of them), and be anxious and tentative in their play. A confident soccer player, on the other hand, will focus on what he needs to do to be successful by taking appropriate, calculated risks and give full effort regardless of the score or level of competition.

But where does this confidence come from? Saying "I can" is not enough. The athlete must believe it. And it starts with *preparation*. Confidence is easier (and more deserved) when a player has dedicated herself to her training. Athletes who take responsibility for their training (physical, mental, nutritional, etc.) will be confident because they know they have done everything they can to prepare for competition. What you put into "you" on the practice field (and in the weight room, and with mental training, and with food, and with tactical study, etc.) will show up on the field in the form of confidence and results. An athlete can believe in her skills because she knows she has developed them. Confidence comes directly from physical and mental preparation.

Part of that preparation is *strengthening your weakness*. No matter how good you are, you have an area of your game that could improve. Your game is limited most by your weaknesses, so make a commitment to develop those today. Have a plan to develop these skills and stick to it. At the same time, be aware of your strengths (i.e., unique skills that make you better than your opponent) and maximize these. If you are fast, be sure you hustle every play. Are you calm under pressure? Then be sure you remain relaxed and focused through each adverse situation.

*Catch yourself doing things right.* Keep a training log that details all your preparation (see above) and pay particular attention to the success you have in practice. Did you execute a new skill? Save a higher percentage of goals? Demonstrate more endurance? Review why you are better than the day before after each practice, and watch your confidence build. Coaches and parents: compliment your athletes on these things too, reinforcing their effort and skill execution.

You are what you think. If you consistently replay mistakes, focus on negatives, and listen to doubters your confidence will be undermined. Surround yourself with coaches and people that believe in you. Keep your self-talk positive (more on that in a later e-mail) and *develop positive images*. Imagery is the ability to create a new, or recreate an old, experience using all of your senses (see, hear, smell, taste, feel). Your body often can't tell the difference between what is real and what is imagined. For example, imagine your favorite food .... see how good it looks, smell the wonderful scent, feel the texture of the food in your mouth and that delicious taste. Now notice that your mouth is watering - yet the food isn't here! The image was enough to get a physical response. So imagine your self being successful, overcoming fatigue, and rebounding from a mistake to improve your performance in these areas. Imagine this frequently and notice how your confidence increases. Rehearse strategy and vividly imagine skill execution and your physical performance will improve. This happens because neural impulses from your brain fire to the muscles as if you were physically performing the skill with real, physical learning taking place. Include what you say to yourself (be positive), practice focus (what should you be paying attention to?), and feel confident as you imagine success.

Confidence is a core attribute of the mentally tough soccer player.

Until next time .....

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