

Martin Jones and Chris Harwood from Loughborough University in the United Kingdom recently published a study (March 2008) on "**Psychological Momentum within Competitive Soccer.**" They interviewed two female and three male players from a university that has won the overall men's and women's British University Sports Association championship for the last 25 years to find out what triggers momentum and how to keep it going. Here is what they found out (and I apply it to youth sport):

Psychological Momentum is an added or gained psychological power that gives a person a feeling that s/he has an edge over the opponent. Athletes and coaches agree that it can be a powerful determinant of success and failure in soccer.

Building and Maintaining Positive Momentum

- Confidence is a big part of momentum, and can come from just one positive play. Help your athletes focus on what they are doing well and what is strategically going in your favor. Reinforce the effort or process it took to get there (e.g., smart decisions, hustle, field awareness, etc.).
- A consistently positive attitude is necessary to maintain momentum. Instill hope and optimism in your athletes, letting them know that their goals can be accomplished by focusing on the action plan the coach has described. By believing that a positive outcome can happen, players then take calculated risks and "try something special" - doing the "extra things" that are needed to win. This effort feels good and when combined with a positive belief (even after missing a challenging shot), confidence that "the next shot could be a goal" remains.
- Help athletes re-create positive images. This can be done with vivid imagery (imagining past successes) at practice, before games, and during breaks in the action. I often teach my athletes to correct a mistake in their mind as soon as possible, so they are left with the "right" image and success feeling. A team highlight video can be a wonderful tool also.
- Help players learn relaxation skills to lower their body's intensity when nervous, and teach energizing skills if they feel flat. Personal control over one's own body creates a sense of mastery and will add to positive momentum.
- Interpret mistakes as positive. Particularly in practice, emphasize that mistakes have taught the athlete something. Be positive about the learning that has occurred and help the athlete make the necessary adjustment - focusing on what will be better as a result of this "mistake."
- Maintain a positive attitude. This is a lot easier when athletes are optimally prepared physically, mentally, and strategically. Set S.M.A.R.T. goals (go back to your workshop notes) and watch how achievement of these goals creates a positive mindset and confidence.
- Maintain a focus on the here and now (on the present moment) - not on the last mistake or the desired future outcome. I tell my athletes to "be where you're at!".
- Give maximum effort, regardless of the score or the level of your opponent, to maintain momentum throughout the match.
- Include the whole team in this attitude by encouraging each other. Team building exercises throughout the season that develop relationships between teammates and build trust will facilitate team cohesion. It is very difficult for only 1-2 players to do all the things above if the team is not doing it with him or her ...

... which leads to:

Triggers for Negative Momentum and How to Overcome It

- Pressure can trigger negative momentum. Players get distracted by a fear of losing and can feel nervous, causing them to play too conservatively.
- Focusing on adversity such as a bad call can also trigger negative momentum as it moves player focus from the "here and now" and what they can control to events that are in the past and out of their control.
- When confidence decreases, players can "think too much." Low confidence, negative thinking and over-thinking keeps negative momentum going. To illustrate, one player said about the experience of negative momentum:
 - "I want to be substituted. I feel threatened. I don't enjoy it, in fact I really dislike the situation I'm in ... I don't want the ball to come to me, I hide."
 - Now recall our workshops when we discussed the benefit of creating a "mastery" or task-focused team climate and increasing motivation via fun and goal achievement. You will see how the difference between these two experiences can powerfully impact the involvement, motivation and performance of your child-athletes.
- Tactically, "getting back to basics" can overcome negative momentum by having the team successfully execute what they do well. This increases confidence and "swings momentum" in their direction. Coaches are encouraged to have game plans for when you have positive momentum and another plan to execute when you have negative momentum. As one player said:
 - " Let's get back to basics and think right. Let's get back to two touch and pass the ball and keep possession and start again. Once we start to dull and stop the opponent's momentum, keep the ball maybe, and increase possession then we can start gathering our own momentum."
- You can swing momentum back to your side by frustrating opponents with your high effort and refusal to give up. Then be very aware of the other teams errors, their fatigue, their weaknesses and maybe how they are not unified (e.g., players yelling at each other). Noticing their mistakes gives you realistic hope that you can exploit their weaknesses and ultimately win.
- Encourage a positive focus and attitude from *every* player, coach and spectator (parents on the sidelines - this means you! You can help the team tremendously by being encouraging, supportive of the coach, believing in their potential for success, and focusing on what is going well).
- Be sure team leaders are aware of all the details above and behave this way *consistently*. Teammates will look to their big players as a model of what should be done. A positive, focused leader who is working hard will inspire the team to do the same.

I wish you positive momentum in all you do. Until next time ... have fun.

Reference:

Jones, M.I., & Harwood, C. (2008). *Psychological momentum within competitive soccer: Players' perspectives*. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 20*, 57-72

Performance
Excellence Center
Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital

Eddie O'Connor, Ph.D., Sport Psychologist
www.PerformanceExcellenceCenter.com