



# Sport Psychology in Football

## ...does it really work?

Sports Psychologist, Roberto Forzoni, gave a presentation of the practical application of Sports Psychology to the members of the Managers' and Coaches' Course held at Warwick University in May.

Outlined below is a summary of his presentation.

When I was asked to make a presentation at the Managers' and Coaches' course on the subject of sport psychology I had no hesitation in coming up with the title – 'Sport psychology in Football – Does it really work?'. Over the years I have heard many contrasting views from football coaches, players and sport psychologist regarding the use of psychology in the game and there are still many negative connotations regarding sport psychology and football; perhaps some of this is due to the use of inexperienced or unqualified practitioners who have given the subject a bad name. Once bitten.

*"Teamwork isn't simple. It's a frustrating, elusive commodity. That's why there are so many bad teams out there, stuck in neutral or going downhill"*  
– Pat Riley, NBA Coach.

My presentation was based on my own practical experience as a football coach using sport psychology, rather than the experience at some clubs of using an 'external' psychologist. The format of the lecture was as follows:

- What has worked and why

- Barriers
- Mistakes
- Case Study
- Evaluation

Ever since I read about a sport psychologist's (John Syer) involvement at Tottenham in the mid eighties, I took a keen interest in the psychological aspects of the game. John Syer wrote a book entitled "Team Spirit" and it was interesting to read about player's thoughts on psychology when it was a very novel subject matter indeed. Unfortunately for football, psychology has remained one of the most underused of the sport sciences. That is, until now.

In 1998 I attended the Managers' and Coaches' course and was left inspired by Steve McClaren's lecture when he spoke about his use of sport psychology at Derby County, where he was coaching at the time. Steve showed some motivational video work he had produced, and recommended some books by top American Coaches. He also gave some advice for which I will be forever grateful – he suggested reading for at least 30 minutes a day!

At the time I remember thinking no chance, but as time went by I tried to become a real student of the game and have managed to read a tremendous amount, including sport biographies, sports science literature and football coaching resources in general.

Most managers and coaches have at least a basic level of sports psychology knowledge even if they are unaware of it! I find there is sometimes a fine line between good coaching practice and the use of sport psychology. In most cases the sport psychology knowledge has been developed over time by the coach, and generally through trial and error. Watching and perhaps emulating some characteristics or methods of other coaches has also been a way of gaining the further experience necessary to help improve the performance of your players.

I started using various psychological techniques whilst working at the Crystal Palace Academy whereby players were continually challenged to improve, set goals and targets for training and matches. I created a really positive, task orientated, environment whereby players were encouraged to make mistakes! This helped players to play without a fear of losing and the fact they each had specific tasks to achieve



quantity. Commitment to do your best on every occasion. To do this you need to concentrate on the processes involved every day.

*"Successful people, companies and teams, do not have a secret formula. They do not do one or two things right. They do hundreds of small things right every day"*

*"The thing about discipline, is not doing a small number of significantly large things well, it is doing a large number of totally insignificant things that nobody else sees, every-time without compromise"*

As a coach / psych if you are asking your players to do everything they can to reach their potential, you need to be able to offer as much support as possible. This might mean liaising with all other staff members so the player has support in technical, tactical, physical, nutritional aspects of their game, it may also be emotional and psycho-social support. It is also difficult to ask players to live a certain lifestyle if you are not leading by example. Continual personal development is one way to ensure you are always well informed.

*"Even when things are going wrong, I have the will to win. Let's say that when times are bad, I am able to act as though they are good. And when things are going as well as they are at present, I am also able to bear it in mind that there will be dodgy times ahead at some point or other". David Trezeguet (Juventus & France). November 2001*

#### DOES IT WORK?

Evaluate everything you do. Ask players for honest feedback. I use unsigned feedback sheets once a season and let players know that if they are not honest in their responses they're going to get the same things next season. Team meetings are great in this respect. The whole process is one of openness and frankness, with the right boundaries set by staff. My own evaluation is based on performance enhancement over time. If I am not helping to achieve more points than before my involvement, I am wasting time for all concerned. I firmly believe that if what you do is not leading to gradual improvement, you need to look in the mirror and check on your strategy and implementation. The window – mirror analogy is useful here. When things go well do you look in the mirror and praise yourself, and when things go poorly look out of the window to apportion blame? Or vice versa. Live the life. Obviously it is impossible and wrong to attribute all the performance improvements to sport psychology. What it does show, however, is that when the whole team of staff and players 'buy into' the concepts and ideas, as set out and directed by the manager, and they continue to work on all other aspects of their game (technical, tactical and physical), then the mental shift that occurs can reap huge rewards. Some sample before and after scenarios are shown below:

*"Success is peace of mind attained through self-satisfaction in knowing you've made the effort to do the best of which you are capable"*  
John Wooden

In going forward, I would strongly advise any coach interested in psychology to attend one of The FA Psychology for Football courses. These courses will be football specific and will help coaches add to their general coaching knowledge.

#### FEEDBACK ON THE MANAGERS' COURSE

Some of the feedback on the course included Tottenham's David Pleat asking how I would convince a player not interested in sport psychology to become interested and buy into the process:

I would generally speak to the team together and develop a team philosophy and strategy. Individuals would be offered the option of seeing me on a one-on-one basis. Most players would not take up this offer and prefer the safety of the team unit. That's fine and will work well (as in the above examples). Certainly if an individual is totally not interested in sport psychology I would not want to convince him otherwise. Unless the

player is committed to using the skills it is of little benefit to keep preaching to him. What I find in practice, however, is that players do respond to improvements in results and most (not all) end up buying in.

Bolton's Sam Allardyce asked if I spent time working with the coaches or managers, rather than players:

As most of my work at first team level has been with Steve Coppell, a very educated, experienced and open-minded manager, who understands a great deal about sport psychology, I have been fortunate and consequently most of my work has been directed to players. I do see a great benefit in using external experienced psychologists to come in and help educate the staff who will then deliver the strategy and procedures to the players. If you use this approach please ensure you bring in a qualified sport psychologist, preferably FA recommended.

Another question referred to using techniques to help players achieve flow states!

Flow refers to the ultimate in athletic experience when you perform to your absolute optimum. It is an ideal state and one very few athletes ever really achieve. Most of the techniques I use are task orientated, controlling things within your control and ignoring the rest; recalling previous performance accomplishments by memory, video and posters to maximize confidence; giving players some autonomy, loads of positive feedback, challenging and varied practices and player-value, to maximize motivation. This is the basis of getting into flow. So whilst not concentrating on flow state (which doesn't help get into flow) I would concentrate on the processes. It's similar to winning. Instead of concentrating on winning, concentrate on how to win!! Back to the daily process.

**For more information on this article or if you have any specific questions or feedback on the practical use of sport psychology in football you can e-mail Roberto Forzoni at [roberto@forsport.co.uk](mailto:roberto@forsport.co.uk)**

**Table 1 BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION FC (SEASON 2002/03)**

Before and after (in red) sport psychology intervention scenarios.

NOTE: During the final 16 games of the season manager Steve Coppell made two astute signings (Ingimarson and Beasant) which were crucial to the team performance improvement, whilst all the staff bought into the psychological aspects and were extremely supportive.

	p	w	d	l	f	a	gd	pts	pts %
2002/2003 games 1-30	30	4	8	18	28	50	-22	20	22%
2002/2003 games 31-46 (16 games)	16	7	4	5	22	17	5	25	52%
2002/2003 equivalent matches (16 games)	16	1	3	11	16	32	-16	6	13%

**Table 2 BRENTFORD FC (SEASON 2001/02)**

Comparison between season 2000/01 and season 2001/02

	p	w	d	l	f	a	gd	pts	pts %
2000/2001	14th	46	14	17	15	56	-14	59	43%
2001/2002	3rd	46	24	11	11	77	43	83	60%

**Table 3 BRENTFORD FC RESERVES (SEASON 2001/02)**

Comparison between season 2000/01 and season 2001/02

	p	w	d	l	f	a	gd	pts	pts %
2000/2001	12th	24	8	10	6	28	-5	34	47%
2001/2002	3rd	24	13	6	5	48	33	45	63%

Roberto Forzoni is a UEFA qualified football coach. He has worked within a broad level of the game including International, League, non-league and Academy levels. He has a Masters degree in Sport Sciences and a Diploma in Sport Psychology. He is a qualified FA Fitness Instructor and in his final year of BASES Accreditation. In 2001 he presented at the World Congress of Sport Psychology on "Motivation in Football" and has contributed articles on sport psychology to Insight magazine. He also works with elite athletes in other sports.