Jay Martin (Ed.)

Best of Soccer Journal

The Art of Coaching

National Soccer Coaches Association of America

MEYER & MEYER SPORT

Jay Martin [Ed.]

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Re-examining Traditional Soccer Coaching Methodology and Introducing Brain Centered Learning in Soccer

Michael Barr

Eastern Pennsylvania Youth Soccer

The following two articles deal with new teaching methodologies.

I was fortunate enough to have Eastern Pennsylvania Youth Soccer send me to a coaching symposium in London the weekend of the Champions League Final. The event took place at Bacon College, which has a working partnership with the Fulham Football Club. The main presenter was Michel Bruyninckx, trainer/coach of the Royal Belgium Football Federation who has caught the attention of many coaches in Europe based on his curriculum of "brain centered learning in soccer."

Former England International Chris Waddle sees a real need for the FA to re-examine the coaching methods used in English soccer because players in England have little flair, movement, or confidence in their game. The lack of success internationally for England could be a direct result of following traditional training and not keeping up with newer accelerated methods to train youths. Bruyninckx may be just what English soccer needs and what American soccer should examine very closely as new training curriculums are presented to coaches, parents and players alike. With his methods endorsed by ex-Belgian National coaches Paul van Himst and Robert Waseige, Bruyninckx estimates 25% of the 100 or so players he has coached have gone on to play with top professional clubs or national teams. It is pioneering work; better still it has broad applications across many sports besides soccer.

Bruyninckx began his presentation with a quote from Dr. Paul Bach-y-Rita: "We see with our brains not with our eyes."

Bruyninckx feels we can make better players in a neural way in order to optimize rhythm, timing and space. In watching Barcelona against Manchester United, they are a clear reflection of what the outcome could be if those areas are emphasized.

In addition, Bruyninckx sees the need for young players to control emotion and show respect to teammates, opponents, referees and the game. Again, look to how the Barcelona players conduct themselves on the field and off.

Slaven Bili, the National Team Coach for Croatia, has stated, "systems are dying, and it's about the movement of ten players." Bruyninckx's training involves constant movement and concentration.

He also believes in the strength of a strong social network in order to lower physical aggression during matches, stimulate cultural integration and improve school performance.

Dr. Marc Comerford of Australia is a proponent of the strength of the pelvic area in preventing future problems and persistent injuries for soccer players. Bruyninckx thinks that one reason for the lack of pelvic strength is due to not developing players to be strong with both feet, which keeps the pelvis in the correct position and utilizes both sides of the body. Without strength in the pelvic area, injuries

develop in numerous areas of the body. Prevention of recurring injuries in players should be a major concern. Bruyninckx points out that over half of all the World Cup players in 2002 and 2006 took anti-inflammatory medication during matches. All of his training sessions utilize skill and comfort. Players are told that tackling is a last resort to win the ball. Often times warm-up exercises with the ball are done without soccer shoes. Bruyninckx showed that the FIFA 11 was found to be a cause of pelvic issues and is now in the process of changing.

Spatial awareness and vision is impeded if coaches do not develop training utilizing peripheral training but continue to use central sight training. This vision can only be achieved when technique is introduced in small groups and the spatial organization of the exercise is based on external focusing. Success of a training session is based on cognitive readiness, spatial reasoning, temporal processing, skill acquisition in a soccer context and developing perceptual awareness and skills. Also players will learn with greater speed and precision if reinforcement and encouragement is constantly administered. Bruyninckx shares the idea that competent players need 500,000 touches on the ball per year, but he is not a proponent of Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000-hour rule because it leads to false expectations.

For a training session to be effective and for the brain to retain the information, the session should peak curiosity, increase motivation, provide interest and be fun. Bruyninckx says, "the environment plays a larger role than genetics when developing players." Emotions shape the brain and help store information. In fact, Bruyninckx feels strongly that you can change lifelong behaviors and patterns even with professional players. He practices what he preaches because in addition to soccer, he works with elderly stroke victims in recovering stability and memory. Brain plasticity makes for lifelong learning for everyone.

The other issue that he feels strongly about is the weeding of players born in the last half of the year. How can we as coaches deprive players of quality training because of the time of year he or she was born, especially at early ages?

His research shows that synchronized tasks in training harmonize both team and individual learning. The four pillars of training should be emotion, attention, concentration and motivation. His exercises often include double tasking with a strong external focus on what an individual may be doing and leading to a final result. All his exercises start in a simple way but lead to differential learning where players are challenged to find optimal solutions. He believes in variable repetitions as opposed to repetitions in the same manner. This may include utilizing different sized balls in an exercise, counting or posing questions as the exercise takes place. In each exercise there should be continuous synchronization in an attempt to reduce perceptual time.

He feels strongly that through Ballritmics you can improve coordination, agility, confidence and the strength in all parts of the weaker foot. You can see Ballritmics in action by searching "Michel Bruyninckx" or "Ballritmics" on the Internet.

Bruyninckx's training information is in complete agreement with leading educators in the world, who are attempting to improve education worldwide by compressing the time it takes to teach and learn the basics of a curriculum through the use of learner centered principles and practices. His goal is to creatively engage players' multiple learning systems, resulting in faster, deeper, and more proficient learning, which is the same as newer education curriculum models worldwide.

We make connections with both sides of the brain during physical activity, where we crisscross the right and left side of our bodies. Motor stimulation directly impacts brain development and academic achievement for all ages. We can absorb more information faster if it is presented in a way that interests the learner. Positive emotions in a relaxed,

alert state improve both learning and motivation. Threats impair any growth within the brain.

Internal rewards (e.g., a sense of pride and satisfaction with one's accomplishments) work better than external ones (e.g., candy, money, special privileges ... trophies?). Brain research tells us that we are we are naturally motivated by curiosity and novelty, meaningful activities, and successes (Jensen 1998, 65).

As learners, we take in more information visually than through any of our other senses. Our brains actually perceive information in images. Muscle memory helps us recall certain skills; it also helps us recall information associated with certain actions. When children, from birth to about age ten, engage in physical activity, it stimulates the growth of neurological pathways in the brain needed for learning.

I will be corresponding with Michel Bruyninckx in the future and plan to have him show coaches in Pennsylvania the numerous exercises he now utilizes with different player ability levels in his training. Hopefully, our Region and US Soccer will have an interest in exploring the successful methods he employs. His training methods should not be ignored. It may offer our country the opportunity to produce consistent, confident, well-rounded players and coaches in the near future.

Five Reasons to Visualize

Lindsey Wilson

Visualization is a powerful tool for optimizing athletic performance. While most coaches know this, few are able to speak to the myriad benefits of proper visualization. If you are a coach looking to guide your team through visualizations, a clear understanding of the "why" will help them buy in to the exercise. Here, we share our top 5 reasons to visualize.

Reason #1: Build Confidence

Quite simply, visualizing success helps build confidence. If you visualize success in your training or racing, you subconsciously improve your belief in your abilities. This has a profound impact on your performance. We all compete according to how we see ourselves, and when you know you can do something you dig deep in the energy reserves, you bring the required focus, you do what you need to do to get it done. Changing how you see yourself changes your performance.

Here is a quick exercise to illustrate: Take a moment and write down your Top 7 moments—in your personal life, sports, your career. Think of seven times you were at the top of your "game." Write them down. Then take a deep breath, close your eyes and replay all seven of those instances in your mind.

Did you do it? If you did, I bet you feel more confident in your abilities and sure of your enormous potential. Visualization is powerful stuff; it is simple, but it brings out your best.

Reason #2: Manage Emotions

Managing emotions is one of the most important aspects to mental training – staying calm under pressure, reacting appropriately to adversity, getting hyped for competition, ignoring unhelpful emotions in the heat of the moment. These are all critical parts of our performance. Even the Navy SEALs have begun to train in visualization techniques to control their emotional reactions in life and death situations. While athletes generally do not face life and death experiences, anxiety, stress and the fear response can creep in and become a huge barrier to peak performance. If this begins to happen, visualization is one of the best tools available.

Some things to try: When you feel nervous or anxious, focus on your breathing and imagine yourself being calm and confident. If you're feeling fatigued, see yourself as powerful and courageous to pump yourself up. You'll be amazed at how your body follows your changed mindset. Sometimes we forget how connected our body and mind are and how much control we really do possess.

You can also practice working through stress or discomfort ahead of time so you are more prepared for that emotion when it happens in real life. If you have a particular situation that causes you stress, visualize yourself in that situation, feeling all those negative emotions. Imagine all the causes and sources for this unproductive emotion, then slowly imagine all of them morphing into positive emotions like courage and confidence. When you mentally rehearse controlling your emotions, you'll be ready for them in real life.

Again, your body very willingly follows your mindset. Change your mind and everything else will change with it.

Reason #3: Develop Skills

Visualization can improve your skill development. Simply visualizing your sports skills (with no physical practice) will cause your brain to trigger the same muscle patterns as if you were actually performing the skill. Neuromuscular science is proving that visualization can actually affect your nervous system in the same way the actual movement does by exciting the same muscle patterns. But you don't get tired!

A study done at the University of Chicago (Dr. Blaslotto) did research on visualization and free throws. The researchers divided people into three groups and tested each group on how many free throws they could make.

After deciding their baseline free throw percentage, he had each group do something different:

1. Group #1: practiced free throws every day for an hour
2. Group #2: visualized themselves making free throws
3. Group #3: did nothing

After 30 days he tested their free throw accuracy again.

This is what he found:

1. Group #1: (physically practiced free throws) improved 24%
2. Group #2: (visualization) improved 23%! All without touching a basketball for 30 days.
3. Unsurprisingly, Group #3 did not improve.

Physical practice is of course important. But imagine using the power of the mind along with physical practice. After all, there is only so much physical practice you can do; your body may wear out, you might get fatigued and practice bad habits, or injuries may prevent you from practicing. Visualization can be a great addition to any training program – it's safe, efficient, and effective!

Reason #4: Injury Recovery

Visualization can help injured athletes in two main ways.

Speed Recovery from Injury

Believe it or not, visualization can increase the speed of recovery. In a study done by Achterberg and Mark S. Rider (Dossey, *Meaning and Medicine*, 167), researchers measured the effects of visualization in altering the immune system. The subjects were divided into two groups. Each group was asked to visualize images of the shape, location, and movement of one of two types of white blood cells. Blood counts were taken both before and after each twenty-minute visualization sessions.

Results showed that the highly directed imagery was cell-specific; that is, it affected one of the two types of white blood cells toward which it was intended or directed, and not the other. This study illustrates the power that the mind has over what is happening in the body. Visualizing a sprained ankle being repaired and active again can decrease the injury time. Visualizing getting better from a cold can speed up your recovery. In the unfortunate case that you are injured or get sick, try visualizing and see what happens.

Prevent Skills from Deteriorating While Injured

A study looking at brain patterns in weightlifters found that the patterns activated when a weightlifter lifted hundreds of pounds were similarly activated when they sat in their chairs and only imagined lifting. In a study at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation

(Yue 2004), researchers compared "people who went to the gym with people who carried out virtual workouts in their heads." He found a 30% muscle increase in the group who went to the gym and a 13.5% increase in the people who just imagined going to the gym! This is powerful stuff. While clearly an athlete needs proper physical conditioning, when they aren't able to do this due to injury, visualization can help them stay on track until they can.

Reason #5: Break a Pattern

Sometimes athletes hit a slump or a plateau, or they are stuck in a pattern of performance that they can't seem to change. When this happens, athletes often over-think the situation or get tense and stressed out, which can make the situation worse. This can be frustrating and lead to some very negative and unproductive mindsets. When an athlete is working hard physically and still not improving, or working hard and not able to perform the way they should, the reason is usually mental.

Visualization can help the subconscious relax around a situation. When success is visualized, the mind becomes more patient. During visualization athletes often see the root of the issue. They can work through their performance patterns in the following ways:

- Visualize past successes and learn from them.
- Study their ideal mental performance state in a controlled environment.
- Explore places for improvement away from the intensity of competition.

Conclusion

Visualization works, pure and simple. I'll leave you with a study by Soviet sport scientists leading up to the 1980 Olympics.

The study explored the effects of mental training through visualization, on four groups of world-class athletes just prior to the 1980 Olympics in Lake Placid. The four groups of athletes were divided as follows:

- Group 1—did 100% physical training to prepare for the Olympic Games.
- Group 2—did 75% physical training and 25% mental (visualization) training.
- Group 3—did 50% physical training and 50% mental (visualization) training.
- Group 4—did 25% physical training and 75% mental (visualization) training.

What researchers found was that Group 4, the group with the most visualization training, showed the greatest improvement of all of the other groups! Group 3 did better than Group 2, and Group 2 did better than Group 1.

Of course, physical training is important, but imagine what combining physical and mental training could do for your athletes!

About the Author

Co-Founder of Positive Performance, *Lindsey Wilson* has been teaching, writing and speaking about mental training for the last five years. Lindsey regularly writes on mental training and has been featured on ESPN's HoopGurlz.com and in Coach and Athletic Director magazine, as well as the NYTimes.com, VISIONS magazine, FullCourtPress.com, and the American Volleyball Coaches Association. She can be reached at lindsey@positiveperform.com. And you can learn more about her mental training services at www.positiveperformancetraining.com