

Developing 'Mental toughness' can help footballers cope with high pressure penalty shoot outs

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(Medical Xpress) -- Penalty shoot-outs are possibly the most stressful situations that footballers have to contend with. They need to be able to focus on the task and block out noise and other distractions coming from the stands.

Research at the University's School of Sport, Health & Exercise Sciences reveals how best to train footballers and other sports people to withstand the pressures of penalty shootouts and other high [pressure](#) moments

Sports Psychologists have been developing and testing specific programmes to develop 'mental toughness' in young sportsmen and women.

Sports coaches usually use rewards to encourage and motivate both team and individual athletes. But the new research has shown that athletes who perform the best under pressure, that is, who show higher levels of mental toughness, are those who are more aware of the negative impacts of poor performance.

Dr Stuart Beattie, of the School of Sport, Health & Exercise Science, explains "We found that the athletes who were reported as being mentally tough by their coaches, are more aware of the prospect of negative repercussions and tend to look for the problems that could lead to these and deal with them far in advance than their less mentally tough

counterparts.”

“A footballer might identify the threat of taking a penalty in front of a raucous, partisan crowd and practice blocking the crowd out to enable him or her to cope with that particular threat when it actually arises. Therefore, being sensitive to or teaching athletes to deal with negative consequences rather than being reward driven seems to promote higher levels of mental toughness.”

Stuart Beattie goes on to explain, “In the real world of top international sports, there are very real repercussions for failing to perform at the highest level- anything from being dropped from the team to receiving the derision of your fans. These are difficult pressures for any athlete to contend with. Our research shows that mentally tough athletes deal with such threat at an early stage which subsequently allows them to cope with the threat at a later stage, when under pressure.”

“To test these initial findings the research team initiated a six month applied intervention programme, where athletes under the supervision of the coach were told that they would be provided forfeits for failure to perform, for example, they’d have to sing a song in front of the group. If and when these forfeits were given, they were given hand in hand with strategies for the individual to cope with the performance failure that lead to the forfeit. They were also made explicitly aware as to why the forfeit was provided. After six months, the athletes in the program showed significant improvement in their coach rated mental toughness scores than those who were not given the intervention programme.”

This research is based on work ongoing since 2008 which has involved over 400 elite young cricketers. Three studies with over 400 elite young cricketers indicate that cricketers who perform best under pressure tend to be sensitive to punishment and insensitive to reward. The research has since shown that mentally tough cricketers are capable of performing

under pressure because they are able to identify threats, deal with them early, and thus are better equipped to cope with pressure. These findings have helped with the design of the ECB mental toughness training programme, which has now been implemented throughout the ECB development pathway. The programme helps players to excel under pressure by exposing them to threats throughout the practice environment and by developing effective coping strategies.

This research has applications beyond sport. At a wider level given the impact of stress on daily life, coupled with an ageing work force and population, having an understanding of the key factors that influence performance under pressure (as well as how to improve this) may help to develop a more psychologically robust population that is not only more able to withstand the negative consequences of stress but able to thrive under pressure.

Provided by Bangor University

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