

Why reaching the top in football is all in the mind, not the feet

June 19 2014, by Cerri Evans



(Medical Xpress)—As a youthful England football team prepares to take on Uruguay in World Cup 2014, new research has uncovered the rare mental attributes needed for talented young players to rise to the top of the English Premier League pyramid.

Sports scientists from the University of Lincoln, UK, and Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) interviewed academy coaches at an unnamed Premiership club to understand the psychological qualities which marked out talented individuals for greatness.

The researchers were interested in understanding how academy coaches identified and defined '[mental toughness](#)' – a quality found in elite athletes across many sporting disciplines, including swimming and

athletics.

Youth players at an English Premier League football academy who would eventually go onto success showed mental toughness from an early age. This enabled them to deal with criticism, confront challenges after repeated failures, and not be intimidated by others.

The study also revealed that discipline off the field, such as sacrificing normal teenage life to ensure the chance of success, also contributed to future triumphs.

The researchers found the mentally toughest players were more independent, taking greater personal responsibility for their development. Academy recruits are subject to tough physical training drills, high expectations and sometimes harsh criticism, coaches said.

In contrast, young players who were high maintenance, requiring a lot of supervision, support, or relying on others to solve their problems were less likely to make it to the top of their profession.

Dr Lee Crust, a sport psychologist in the School of Sport & Exercise Science at the University of Lincoln, collaborated with LJMU on the research.

He said: "The study asks the question 'what makes you mentally strong enough to take the knocks and keep going, to lead the group?' We wanted to look at what might separate a player in the Premier League from another in the lower levels, how they are able to kick things up to a level of competitiveness which drives them to succeed.

"The report found that mentally tough players demonstrated a commitment to learning, had a strong level of trust with their coach, were more compliant with instructions and were always seeking ways to

improve.

"These players were not afraid to make mistakes, and actually relished challenging situations; they were committed to learning how to cope with their own limitations by working on weaknesses whilst also playing to strengths.

"We found that coaches sought to foster independence and resourcefulness in the young players to enhance mental toughness, but that attention to the psychological development of young players was reported to be inadequately addressed in comparison with other aspects of performance such as technical skill or physical conditioning."

The research saw eight coaches and a director from an unnamed Premier League football academy interviewed.

More information: "'What it takes': perceptions of mental toughness and its development in an English Premier League Soccer Academy," Clive Cook, et al. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*. 13 Jun 2013. [DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2013.857708](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2013.857708)

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