

Euro 2024: How new psychology can help conquer the pressures of a penalty shootout

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Every winning team at the European Championship since 2008 has had to succeed at a penalty shootout. It's a harsh reality that turns dreams into nightmares. Just a single kick, a fleeting moment over in seconds, etches

a player's name into the chronicles of heartbreak or triumph.

England in particular has a [difficult history with penalties](#), having been knocked out of international tournaments on numerous occasions that way. A failed penalty shootout in the final of Euro 2020 not only meant losing the tournament to Italy, but also led to a [torrent of racist abuse](#) directed at Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka, who missed their spot kicks.

For many, the prospect of this ultimate test of nerve and concentration induces a sense of dread. In that moment, the weight an entire nation's hopes rests squarely upon their shoulders, a burden so immense that even the most battle-hardened professionals can crumble. So, what can young players do to strengthen their resilience?

Take Max, a promising young striker I interviewed as part of my [research](#), whose international debut tournament came down to a fateful penalty shootout:

"The roar of the crowd faded into silence as I walked from the halfway line to the penalty spot. The only thing I could hear was the pounding of my heart, getting louder with each step. Then I started to doubt my abilities."

In that moment, the carefully crafted routine Max had honed through countless hours of training evaporated, replaced by a frenzy of uncertainty and second-guessing. His mind raced, replaying past misses and imagining the scathing headlines that would follow. He tried to think positive thoughts, but the more he tried, the worse he felt. With a heavy swing of his foot, the ball sailed wide, and Max's heart sank.

Our research team at the University of Plymouth has recognized the need for a psychological intervention in sport—a way to equip players

with the mental resilience to withstand the immense pressure of the penalty shootout.

Functional [imagery](#) training (FIT) is an innovative approach that merges motivational interviewing with [cognitive skills](#) like [self-talk](#) (giving yourself motivational talks), goal setting and multi-sensory imagery. It has been shown to be [five times more effective](#) for penalty kicks than traditional mental skills training such as positive affirmations.

Multi-sensory imagery is about a player using their imagination to visualize, play out scenarios, and control emotion. This enables athletes to prepare for performance through a structured thinking routine.

Through FIT, footballers learn to vividly imagine every aspect of their performance, from the sights and sounds of the stadium to how they might control their anxiety in the moment. They develop a personalized routine: imagining the feel and weight of the ball in their hands, the exact trajectory where they want it to travel, remaining calm and controlling their breathing, and the sensation of the ball leaving their foot—all while cultivating a deep sense of purpose and motivation.

It's been so effective in sport that it's been used in the military and in business leadership. And [research](#) has shown similar effectiveness in weight loss.

Imagine Max, now equipped with the tools of FIT, individually crafted to his personalized routine. At the halfway line, before his penalty, he quietens his mind. He imagines himself stepping up to the white spot, the weight of the nation's hopes resting on his shoulders. He hears the roar of the crowd, feeling the tension in his muscles.

This time, as he walks to the penalty spot, instead of doubts and fears, Max's mind is flooded with a sense of unwavering determination. He

activates his performance routine: controls his breathing, relaxes his shoulders, focuses on the target, sees himself striking the ball with precision, watches it nestle into the back of the net and remains connected to his calm self. This vivid mental rehearsal becomes a way to remain in, or enter, a [flow state](#), enabling him to enjoy the moment.

Overcoming obstacles

Of course, the path to mastery is never without its obstacles. Athletes in our FIT research sometimes grapple with the lingering ghosts of past failures, the self-doubt that threatens to undermine newfound confidence. Roughly 80% of our daily thoughts are [negative](#).

Negativity is a normal part of how we think, but this 80% figure can be shifted to even the balance, or optimistically tipped towards a higher frequency of positive thoughts. Unfortunately, the shift only happens through experience, courage and growth—all elements of FIT delivery.

Another obstacle is a lack of "imagery ability"—the ability to conjure up the right imagery. Research consistently shows that combining imagery with practice [significantly improves performance](#).

But what if you struggle to imagine? What if you can't visualize where you want the ball to travel? Until this year, it was assumed that imagery couldn't be improved for those with low abilities.

However, we ran a study that included professional footballers, training them in various ways that significantly [improved their imagery ability](#). In interviews, athletes reported better performance and well-being. Like any muscle, imagery can be strengthened to enhance detailed visualization and impact performance.

For many footballers at Euro 2024 the specters of past penalty misses

loom large. From England's agonizing defeat in the 2020 final to countless nail-biting shootouts, the psychological toll on players is undeniable. But against Switzerland in 2024, England displayed remarkable nerve and focus to score all five penalty kicks, and Bukayo Saka banished the memory of his missed shot against Italy.

The narrative can be rewritten. Players like Max can step onto the pitch in full control of their thoughts, transforming anxiety and self-doubt into focus and unshakeable determination. So far our FIT work has focused on [penalty](#) kickers, not savers—we have yet to undertake research with goalkeepers, but that's the next chapter.

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