

MENTAL COACHING IN FOOTBALL

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I would like to look at the role of psychologist in the Belgian football league and share my experience as a medical director of several Belgian premierships teams. My analysis is made as clinical director not as a psychologist and therefore I will not focus on the clinical problems or on the available solutions/treatments. I will highlight the position of the psychologist within the medical team and on the facilities/infrastructure the club should provide to enable the psychologist to function optimally.

The introduction of a psychologist as part of the medical team in Belgian football is only recent. When I started as club doctor there was no psychologist involved with football neither on a club basis or on an individual basis.

Two reasons could explain this phenomenon: on one hand, the soccer world is still a macho world in which it is unusual to admit weaknesses, especially mental ones. On the other hand, it was assumed for a long time that a psychologist could not add value. Gradually people start to understand that both these assumptions were wrong.

I witnessed the introduction of the first sports psychologist in Belgian football. This psychologist was linked to the club and made several visits a week. He focused on two aspects; the players as a group by means of collective and teambuilding sessions and on the individual management of players. His teambuilding sessions provided an added value immediately; they achieved what they intended to do by improving the atmosphere in the group, they used tools to stimulate leadership and worked on design and execution of strategies (although the sessions were fun, there was a clear purpose). The sessions were created in a way that the players had fun but also worked hard physically.

The manager introduced the psychologist in the medical team because he saw the need to improve players individually and collectively. Where things went wrong was with the confidentiality of the meetings and dialogues, the players had with the psychologist. The psychologist felt the need to share the content of the meetings with the manager. As a result of this, the players felt that there was a breach of trust and further refused to talk to the psychologist. This eventually led to the departure of the psychologist who was not replaced. This was a missed opportunity to integrate the psychologist permanently in the medical team.

I was fortunate to work with another psychologist in a second club. He was appointed by the board of the club and his role was to collaborate with the manager. His tasks were similar to the previous psychologist I worked with: collective and teambuilding sessions and individual mental guidance. Under these conditions, the sports psychologist could perform perfectly. The coach and the other members of the staff did have insight in the personality profiles of all players (and of all members of the technical and medical staff, and of the board members!), but the personal content of the discussions between psychologist and players was not shared. These profiles could clarify or even predict the actions/attitude of players. Both the players and staff felt that the psychologist's contribution added significant value. When to psychologists position was deemed unnecessary by a subsequent manager, the players asked to reinstate him in his job and were successful.

Sharing these experiences with you is not an attempt to entertain you. I want to show how a psychologist can be an added value in football:

1. Teambuilding and collective sessions.
 - a. Enforcing bonding with the group.
 - b. Teaching to work and live together.
 - c. Working together towards a common goal.
 - d. Working task-oriented to accomplish a collective result (this is extremely important because football is a collective sport, but it is experienced very individually).
 - e. Feeling in a very natural way who can take the lead, but also who can be of great value in another way to reach a common goal.
2. Individual mental coaching.

Not all players are mentally as strong as they should be. In the world of football one can talk quite easily in terms of technical, tactical or physical parameters. Players can also quite easily express which their qualities and weaknesses are; but only few shall (certainly not in public) admit that they are mentally weak. Therefore it is extremely important that the player trusts the sports psychologist.

The information that both share, should be treated confidentially! Obviously, the psychologist should give the player tools to enhance his mental strength : less loss of concentration / a better focus; less fear for failure... (these things can be clarified by psychologists).

In conclusion: a psychologist can be a valuable member of the medical team when he is given the right infrastructure to function optimally.