BENNION KEARNY

Soccer Tough II

Advanced Psychology Techniques for Footballers



Dan Abrahams

Soccer Tough II: Advanced Psychology Techniques for Footballers *

by Dan Abrahams

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[Smashwords Edition]

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Published in 2015 by Bennion Kearny Limited.

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ISBN: 978-1-909125-49-0

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Published by Bennion Kearny Limited, 6 Woodside, Churnet View Road, Oakamoor, Staffordshire, ST10 3AE

www.BennionKearny.com

Table of Contents

- Title Page
- Dedication
- Acknowledgements
- About the Author
- Introduction
  - A Mental Structure
  - Practice
  - Prepare
  - Perform
  - Progress
  - Passion with Precision
- Practice – Introduction
- Chapter 1
- You Have The Talent...
  - Talent in Abundance
  - Soccer Mindset
  - No-One Really Knows
  - Your Talent, Your Decision
- Chapter 2
- Profile the Next Level
  - Becoming the Best
  - The Breakdown
  - The Nitty-Gritty
    - Technical
    - Tactical
    - Physical
    - Psychological and Social
  - Think About It
- Chapter 3
- Your Training Script

- Premiership Goalkeeper
- A Young Defender
- An Ageing Midfielder
- You Have the Power…

Chapter 4

Intentional Training

- Intentional Excellence
- Intentional Practice
  - Interesting
  - Intense
  - Internalised
  - Integrated
- Practice with Intention

Chapter 5

How Rachel Created Race Tracks

- A Girl Called Ray
- Your Inner World: Your Brain
- The Road to Excellence
- Hungry Connections

Chapter 6

Reach for Ronaldo, Stretch for Smith

- Seeing Possibility
- The Imagination of a Champion

Practice Pep Talk

Prepare – Introduction

Chapter 7

Raising the Bars

- The Fragility of Feeling
- Your Personal Playstation Bars
- Finding Your Bar Markers
- Confidence Markers Examples
- Energy Markers Examples
- Making Your Choices

- Raising Your Bars

Chapter 8

Getting into Process

- Your Relationship with Football
- The Process
- Scripting Your Process
- Simplifying Your Script
- Throw in an Animal
- And Your Role Model
- A Script for an Oscar

Chapter 9

Your First Controller

- Your Controllers
- Your Body Controller
- Power Poses
- The Mind Body Link
- Controlling your Script

Chapter 10

Your Second Controller

- The Talk of a Champion
- Your Thinking and Your Self-Talk
- Your Inner Audio Player
- A Controller Combo

Chapter 11

Your Inner Batteries

- Your Inner Movie
- Picture Perfect
  - Build your Bars
  - Load your Script
  - Power up Your Controllers
- Picture Creation

Chapter 12

How Marley is learning to Mentally Contrast

A Different Way of Thinking
What Am I Going To Do?
A Brutal Competitor
The Marley in You
Prepare Pep Talk
Perform – Introduction
Chapter 13
A Matchday Mindset
Wonderful Doing Woeful
The Feeling of Winning
The Feeling of Losing
Relaxation Marks the Spot
Make Your Routine, Routine
Two Hour Countdown
Your Physical Warm Up
The Final Ten
Chapter 14
ANA and the ANTs
A Brain Called ANA
ANTs
The Squashing Process
In Soccer Tough, I gave you a simple way to squash ANTs, and here I'm going to reinforce my SPOT STOP SHIFT principle of dealing with your inner bugs. It's simple, it's quick, and it's effective.
SPOT – STOP – SHIFT
STOP
SHIFT
Confident Shifting
Helpful Shifting
The Quick and the Dead
Chapter 15
BLR Ronaldo

- Yala
- Eleven Heaven
- Fun, Freedom and Focus

Chapter 16

Playing 80/20

- The Molaison Memory
- Two Brains, Two States of Play
- The Unconscious/Conscious Sweet-spot
- Xavi
- Consciously Unconscious
  - Check-Ins
- Pressure Play

Chapter 17

Nervenstaerke

- Managing Yourself
  - Start with the Negative
  - Process Control
  - Stick to Your Routine
  - Use Your Controllers
  - Stick to Your Script
  - Squash the Killer ANTs
  - Commit to Front Foot Football

Perform Pep Talk

Progress – Introduction

Chapter 18

Your One True Vision

- The Soccer Image Scale
- Your Soccer Image Scale

Chapter 19

Going Dark and Being Tough

- Going Dark
  - Tough on Process
  - Performance Second

- Leaving Dark
- Tough on Training
- Tough on Championship habits

Chapter 20

The Body That Rayan Builds

- The Story of Ray and Yannick
  - Focus
  - Inner Pictures
  - Bodily Confidence and the Confidence to Play
  - Persistence
  - Improving your Soccer Image
- No Other Option

Chapter 21

To Remember, To Dream

- A Footballer….

Chapter 22

The Power of Yet!

- The Change that Yet Makes
- TAPP Mastery
- Trust
- Accept
- Patience
- Practice

Progress Pep Talk

Conclusion – Some Feedback

Other Books from Dan Abrahams

Other Books from Bennion Kearny

Dedication

For all those in sport striving to be the very best they can be….

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I'd like to thank my publisher James at Bennion Kearny for all his support and advice over the past four years. I'd also like to thank my family – Mum, Dad and Zoe – for their unwavering support.

Thanks to footballers Yannick Bolasie, Kelly Smith, Rachel Yankey, Marley Watkins, and strength and conditioning coach Rayan Wilson for supporting this project and for allowing me to tell the world about their soccer mindset.

A big thanks to all those players and coaches who enjoy and support my work. I learn from you all every day and appreciate the time you take to praise and challenge my work.

Finally, the biggest thanks of all to my amazing wife Heidi, without whose unfailing support there would be no book. Thank you for being the best editor, the most helpful critic, the most enthusiastic fan, and the most caring and loving wife.

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About the Author

Dan Abrahams is a registered sport psychologist specialising in soccer. He works with players, coaches, clubs and soccer organisations globally and is passionate about de-mystifying sport psychology for everyone involved in the beautiful game.



His soccer tools and techniques have been used by some of the leading coaches in the game, and he has become the go-to guy for elite professional players who want to improve the mental side of their game.

As a former professional golfer, Dan holds a First Class Honours Degree in psychology and a Master's Degree in sport psychology. He is a speaker in demand at universities and colleges, and has delivered his positive, practical and upbeat messages at conferences and to governing bodies around the world.

Dan has spread his soccer psychology philosophies across the soccer globe by using social media and his mindset techniques are now used across Europe, the USA, the Middle East, the Far East and Australasia.

Follow Dan at **@DanAbrahams77**

Also follow Dan on Instagram: **danabrahamssport**

Introduction

I hope you're sitting comfortably. We're going to have a conversation. We're going to have a chat about your favourite thing in the world. We're going to talk about your soccer.

This is going to be an honest discussion – I need to know plenty about your game if I'm going to be able to help you. I need to be able to see your soccer through your eyes.

So, I want you to open up to me. I want you tell me about the thoughts and feelings you experience when you train. I want you to tell me how you're preparing for an upcoming game. And I want to discuss what you're trying to achieve going into a match. Tell me in detail – the more I know about your game the greater I can impact your soccer.

By the time we're finished talking, you're going to see soccer in a completely different way. I'm probably going to bust some myths you might have about how you should train and what great pre-match preparation looks like. And I'm confident I'm going to give you some 'aha!' moments – some great answers to some of the long term challenges you've faced on the football pitch.

I must warn you, however, that this isn't always going to be a comfortable ride or an easy journey. For as long as you are working with me I need you to understand that comfort is the enemy of improvement. Perhaps the most impressive thing about champions – in all sports – is their ability to slide the scale of relaxation as they learn and compete. They know when to turn up the volume of intensity and stretch their comfort zone, but they equally know when they should slow down and loosen up. The knowledge and application of this balancing act is central to their development and their play.

Despite my tough stance on your soccer, at the heart of this book is *enjoyment*. I want you to enjoy your football. I want you to play freely and express yourself. I want you to experience the thrill of seeing yourself get better, seeing yourself become more skilful, and experience the sense of fulfilment that will accompany the small successes that follow effective learning.

A Mental Structure

Over the past decade I've noticed a consistent pattern to the challenges my soccer clients face. During that crucial first session my questions, more often

than not, uncover a lack of direction in their game. They want to get better, but they don't necessarily know how to. Most players struggle to tell me what their individual development programme is. They don't always have specific training goals that will help them be the very best they can be. They go into training focused on being good but they find it difficult to define what good looks like. There is seldom a plan. There is rarely a structure to their training session.

This word – structure – is important. A common thread across the mentality of many of the soccer players I meet is the lack of a mental structure they have on a daily basis. And just as they're not as organised as they could be with their training thoughts, so they lack this mental structure *on* the pitch.

How do you prepare for a game mentally? Do you have a mental structure when you step onto the pitch? Do you have a routine on matchday that helps you find your high performance mindset? Do you know how to manage yourself from the first whistle to the last?

And what about after the match? Do you analyse your game while it's fresh in your mind so you can learn from what went well and understand what you need to work on? Do you know how to be tough on yourself and kind on yourself at the same time?

If the answer is 'no' to most of these questions then this book will provide you with some answers. This book will help you fashion a mental structure to complement the work you will be doing technically, tactically and physically.

Practice

The attitude that accompanies you when you arrive at the training pitch will heavily determine how good you get at soccer. That sounds obvious, right? Come to training with a good attitude and you'll improve. But I don't think a footballer's practice attitude is obvious at all. I think many soccer players (and many soccer coaches for that matter) define training attitude in highly simplistic terms.

A great attitude starts with an open mind – a mind that places no limits on ability. Soccer players who believe they can't certainly won't, whereas footballers who make the decision that there are no boundaries to their game will discover just how good they can be. We'll discuss the specifics of this type of mentality in chapter one.

The trajectory of your soccer is influenced by your ability to see what better

looks like. A vision of the level above you, and then a plan to get there, lies at the heart of what we know, in science, about the art of improving. If you don't know what you need to develop, you'll struggle to be a great learner. You need a clear and concise plan of how you are going to work to achieve your goals. Without one you'll be directionless. Chapters two and three will introduce you to what I call the training script.

A world-class training attitude also includes an understanding of your comfort zone. To develop skill, you have to stretch this zone of comfort and for many sessions you may find you need to practice outside of this zone. Chapter four will familiarise the reader with my concept of intentional training and chapter five will present the story of how one of the greatest footballers in the women's game was able to train her brain as she trained her game.

We close this first section of the book with a message related to improving your game. Chapter six asks you to *reach and stretch.* Champion soccer players are always striving to improve by training at the edge of what they feel is possible for their game. They reach and stretch. They reach and stretch for better. They reach and stretch for improved skill. They reach and stretch for quicker, stronger and higher. It is by reaching and stretching in training, for heights beyond what you thought possible – out of comfort zones – that you will find out how good a soccer player you can be.

Prepare

The mental preparation of a soccer player is a private affair. Most have their personal rituals, and just about every footballer will physically prepare to play in some way.

When I ask footballers about their match preparation, it's usual to hear things related to nutrition and exercise. Players will eat a few hours before play and they will stretch out their muscles to ready them and to lessen the chance of injury.

But when I ask them to clarify how they prepare mentally, I am often met with silence. This lack of knowledge, related to the mental side of preparation, has to change. The modern day footballer should be as passionate about preparing his mind to play as much as his body because without the mental qualities of focus and confidence he will be unable to express his physicality. He jeopardises his technical efficiency and he may not be able to compete tactically and strategically. Section two of this book will provide the information needed to fill

your mental preparation gaps.

What can be more important pre match than putting in place habits to build your confidence and energy for the game ahead? In chapter seven, I will present a concept that will enable you to identify the ingredients of confidence and the factors that affect your energy. By pinpointing the things that build your confidence and by isolating the factors that raise your energy, you can prepare to play with these important mind and body components. Leaving nothing to chance starts before kick off in the quiet depths of your mind.

Chapter eight will look at one of my most important soccer psychology tools. Every footballer, irrespective of the level they compete at, should have a match script – a set of instructions that they carry with them onto the pitch. In this chapter, I am going to tell you how to create a simple yet powerful script to help you focus your mind and centre your attention.

Once you have a match script in place, you will need to know how to execute it. You need to know how to bring your concentration back to the script when times get tough. In chapters nine and ten you will get to learn about your two controllers – the two self-management techniques you can use to stay on script. I'd like you to become world-class at using these two controllers. Soccer is a quick sport and you have to make sure you use your controllers to play at your very best every second and every minute of every match.

The final two chapters in this section provide you, the footballer, with some mental tools to try out before you go and play. Chapter 11 will teach you about one of the most popular techniques in sport psychology – visualisation. And chapter 12 covers the uncommon practice of thinking about what you'll do if it goes wrong in the heat of battle – preparing for the worst. Champions know exactly how to counteract the 'what if' moments – what if we go two goals down early? What if I make a couple of mistakes in the first five? What if I'm not feeling at my best? These 'negative' questions help the soccer player open a world of solutions. I want you thinking like that. I want you thinking like a champion.

Perform

On matchday itself, I like to insist on consistency. Reliable performers have a regular unshakeable matchday routine. They know exactly what they have to do from the minute they get up and they know precisely what they should not do.

As the match draws nearer, it's crucial to have specific tasks to complete that

As the match draws nearer, it's crucial to have specific tasks to complete that narrow your focus, build appropriate intensity levels, and spotlight on-pitch strategy. If you want to consistently perform highly, you need to know what your matchday routine looks like, in detail. Chapter 13 requires you to list a set of procedures that will focus your mindset.

And when you're mentally warmed up, so the moment of truth arrives. Kick off! The preparation is complete. It's you, the ball, your team mates and the opposition. Now it's showtime.

As you play, you get the opportunity to use the tools and techniques that you learnt in the preparation section. Most importantly, you get to use them to overcome negative thoughts or *squash the ANTs*. ANTs stands for Automatic Negative Thoughts and I'm going to develop the interventions I introduced to you in my first Soccer Tough book. Let's get speedy at squashing those most destructive of thoughts – the ones that tighten your muscles and slow your body down! Chapter 14 will show you how.

In Chapter 15, I get to introduce you to a great squasher of ANTs. He's a well known footballer who I've had the pleasure of working with over the last few seasons. He's a fantastic player and an even better person. Along our journey together, we've constructed a match script that suits his eyes, suits his ears, and suits his body. He'll show us how he puts it all together wrapped in a bubble of fun, freedom and focus.

Of course, playing with fun, competing with freedom, and allowing your mind to focus isn't possible if you 'think' too much on the pitch. The mind must be clear for you to play without fear. I ask all my players to strike a balance between doing and thinking – there is a mental sweet spot that all footballers can settle into. The 80/20 rule I describe in chapter 16 will help you flex your thinking muscles at the right moment and relax your thoughts at other times.

On-pitch mental techniques wouldn't be complete, of course, without lessons from the mentally toughest footballers on the planet. That accolade, I feel, lies safely with the German international team. To date they have never lost a penalty shoot-out. They even have a word in the German language to describe their fearless nature which they apply time and time again from the terrifying 12-yard spot. Chapter 17 will help you become fluent in the Germanic version of mental toughness.

Progress

Our final section is as important as the others. If you want to improve, you have to believe you can get better. You have to see yourself capable of delivering at a higher level.

The development of skill is mediated by your soccer image – the picture you house in your mind of yourself as a footballer. Your ability to play well, in each and every game, also depends on this internal image. It's a powerful indicator of what you can achieve in soccer today and tomorrow.

Chapter 18 will give you a tool to measure your soccer image. Do you see yourself in a positive or negative light? Is your soccer image healthy enough to allow you to develop your game?

Building your soccer image starts with knowing where you are now. The footballer who thinks and acts a level above has, in my opinion, an optimistic view of herself. By thinking big, she can build the developmental scaffolding that her game needs to get better.

Chapter 19 offers specific game analysis patterns to grow your soccer image and progress your game. Do you know how to analyse your performances to maintain confidence? Maybe you do. But do you know how to analyse the weak parts of your game whilst expanding your self-belief? This chapter teaches you to improve your soccer image whilst being tough on yourself and your performance.

Of course, your performances won't be stellar if you're not physically fit and your body isn't strong and in balance. It's difficult to be mentally tough in your soccer when your body is weak. Just as mind affects body, so body impacts mindset. Chapter 20 introduces you to one of the world's most innovative football-specific strength and conditioning coaches. This trainer is becoming the go-to guy for players at the top level of the game in England and his work on their soccer physiques stretches further than their bodies. As he works their physicality, he fine-tunes their mind.

The final two chapters provide, I hope, some inspiration. They will give you a guide to thinking your way towards an improved soccer image as well as a number of tools to retain a positive image through tough times and periods when it feels like you're not going to get better.

Passion with Precision

I'm passionate about helping soccer players of all levels and ages get better and

the strategies in this book are designed for everyone in mind.

I've written it for you, the soccer player. The hungry, craving-for-better soccer player. The structure in this book is designed to help the best in the world as well as the Sunday league player. Anyone who wants to improve can benefit from it. You can take the techniques onto the five-a-side pitch with you, or you can use them in the stadium in front of 50,000 screaming fans.

I like to combine passion with precision. What is written on the pages of this book demands a brain that not only loves the beautiful game but which is prepared to study it with intricate detail. Champions are passionate and champions are precise.

What does better look like?

What does better feel like?

Before you turn the page, be precise with your definition of better. I'm going to show you how you can make that a reality. I'm going to show you a world of better soccer.

Practice – Introduction

People will tell you that you can't. People will tell you that it's impossible. People will tell you not to try. People will tell you not to bother.

Ignore them…

Because nobody knows just how good you can become. *Keep* going!

It is for *you* and you *alone* to determine how good you can be.

If people tell you that you are great. If people tell you that you have promise and potential. If people tell you that all you have to do is turn up. If people tell you that success is inevitable.

Ignore them…

Because nobody knows just how good you can become. *Never* get complacent!

It is for *you* and you *alone* to determine how good a soccer player you can be.

To get where you want to go, you've got to be willing to go deep with your practice. You've got to be willing to do things smarter, with greater focus and with more intention than the crowd of players around you. You've got to be willing to be a student of *your* game and a student of *the* game.

You won't become the kind of soccer player you want to be if you just think about it. That doesn't work – that's pop psychology! You have to know *how* to get the most from yourself. You have to know about effective practice protocols. Then you have to do it – you have to go practice your game with the mindset of a champion, and with the look of a winner.

I call it practice, rather than training, because the word relates better to the demands of improving skill. Training is physical, practice is mental – it's repetition, it's reinforcement, it's focus, it's intelligence, and it's comfort zone busting. It's also technical and tactical – it's new moves, it's different positioning, it's mastery, it's body control, and it's the application of new knowledge.

By the end of this section you will have a *different* practice mindset. A *better* practice mindset.

- You will know *exactly* what you need to do to get better

- You will know how to practice *effectively*

- You will know how your brain reacts and responds to practice, and you will know how to get the *most* out of this powerful ‘muscle’

- You will know how to *stretch* yourself in training sessions… and how to *keep* stretching yourself

But before we get into the intricacies of world-class practice and training I’m going to help you expand your definition of talent. If you want to be the very best footballer you can be, you’ve got to believe in yourself – this means you’ve got to identify the talent you *already* possess. Everyone has talent. Everyone can be good at this game. Everyone can excel. Turn to chapter one to find out more…

Chapter 1

You Have The Talent...

I have a new rule number one for you.

It isn't about positioning or movement or hold-up play or passing with progression. It isn't about strength or stamina or agility or speed. It is more impactful than any of those. It can't be seen and it can't be touched. It is personal to you but it is a non-negotiable for every soccer player around the world. And within its philosophy lies more fun, and greater levels of success.

So what is this number one rule that I want you to embrace? It's brief, it's powerful, and it will impact your game:

You have to train, you have to play, and you have to think like there are no limits to your ability.

Let me say this again – I want you to read it and digest it. I want it to become the heartbeat of your development as a footballer.

You have to train, you have to play, and you have to think like there are no limits to your ability.

Take a few minutes to imagine a footballing world where this philosophy exists for you. Imagine a mentality that sets no limits and a game that has no boundaries. Blow this up in your mind. What do you experience? What do you see? How do you feel? What are you saying to yourself? What are others saying to you? How do you hold yourself on the training pitch? What is your attitude on match day?

I say this, and I ask these questions, because I know that many footballers hold themselves back by how they see themselves as a player. They make premature judgements on how good they can become. They aren't no-limit soccer players. They don't think they have the capability to get to the next level, and then the level after that. They choose to say 'This is who I am' rather than exercise their imagination by saying 'This is who I can become'.

As a consequence, many footballers fall foul of the mental side of the game. They set their ambitions and aspirations too low. They give up too easily. They give in to the kind of destructive emotions that hold their game back – emotions such as frustration, despondency and anxiety.

If they have a bad game they walk off the pitch reinforcing the notion that they can't, they won't, and they never have. Their negative brain beats them up and enforces a zone of comfort around the average. *"I knew it was unrealistic to think I could have a good game against this kind of opposition. I know where I really belong, and it's not at this level!"*

A footballer who trains and plays with self-limiting beliefs will never truly discover how good she can be. If she practices her game with fear or intimidation, or tinged with a lack of confidence, she won't build the skill her body is capable of. If she runs onto the practice pitch overly concerned by what others think of her or preoccupied with mistakes and errors, her brain won't have the capacity to focus and subsequently learn from her coaches.

Similarly, a soccer player who thinks he can't, definitely won't. If his thoughts about his game project pictures of miscontrol and an inability to find space or retain the ball, then his inner map will become his outer reality.

And all of these negatives start with the perception you have of your talent. Your natural ability. Your inborn promise. So let me repeat:

You have to train, you have to play, and you have to think like there are no limits to your ability.

Talent in Abundance

I think you have talent in abundance. I can say this confidently because I know, from the very fact that you are reading these pages, that you already have one form of talent for soccer – passion. If you didn't love the game you wouldn't be taking the time to read my words.

Having a passion for something is a talent. It may not be physical in its quality. It may not trap a ball or ghost you past a defender but let me be clear – you can't be any good at something if you don't have a passion for it. Passion is the running start that edges you into the lead!

There are many who are involved in soccer – coaches, volunteers, parents – who see talent in a one-dimensional way. When they hear the words 'natural ability' they conjure up an inner movie of a young player dribbling through the opposition and bulging the back of the net with an unstoppable shot into the top right corner of the goal. They picture big and tall and strong. They think of effortless footballing wizardry made from a cocktail of quick feet and impossible vision.

I don’t deny the existence of physical talent. That would be like denying the existence of the sun and the moon and the sky. There is no doubt that some find it easier to play soccer than others. They may have an extraordinary physical presence through height, strength and speed. Or they may have a way with the ball that, at first glance, appears unteachable. They bring the ball down effortlessly, they consistently spot the killer pass and they strike the ball perfectly every time.

These are physical talents and they are important. But their impact eventually lessens without another form of talent – the talent I think is most important. Mindset talent.

Mindset talent is what lies inside you, hidden from view, away from the prying eyes of scouts, teammates, parents, coaches and volunteers. It is my belief that in football, the internal drives the external. Soccer success is as much about your inner qualities as it is about your outer capabilities, because the outside (your skill) is heavily influenced by the inside (your mindset).

If developing a soccer game is like building a house, then mindset talent is the mortar to the bricks of physical talent. Without mortar, the house will topple over. Without mindset talent, physical talent won’t help you fulfil your potential. You will only go so far!

And the exciting thing is that there are countless mindset talents that you may possess. Determination is a talent. As is dedication. Patience is a talent. So is focus. In fact, we can split focus into several talent categories:

- The ability to focus on the pitch under pressure

- The ability to focus following distraction

- The ability to focus on doing the right things every day to be the best you can be

Having travelled the footballing globe I’ve learnt that we have all become a little too obsessed with what we see on the outside. We don’t appreciate the skills that are inherent on the inside. Skills like confidence, focus, self-belief, discipline, listening, dedication, learning and understanding. Skills like emotional management, effort, perseverance, self-regulation, self-awareness, thinking flexibility and leadership. Skills like the ability to cope through tough times, self-sufficiency, motivation, empathy, initiative, self-assessment and the ability to get on with others.

These are abilities and talents too. They make or break players, depending on their presence or absence. They influence the level a soccer player competes at, and how quickly a player gets there. They also mediate the length of a career and the enjoyment that grows from playing competitively.

A footballer wins with his mind as much as his feet.

Soccer Mindset

Soccer is as much a game of mindset and mentality as it is a physical discipline because of its complexity. It's not a sport where you are rejected or retained because of what your genes have given you.

There is far more chance of you being ruled out of becoming a world class athlete than there is of you failing to become a world class footballer. Science tells us that you've probably got to have a lot of fast twitch muscle fibres to win a 100-metre race. Likewise, you've probably got to be over six feet tall to compete internationally in the high jump. In contrast, you have to be small and weigh very little to be a jockey riding winners at the Kentucky Derby, the Grand National or the Melbourne Cup.

Similarly, it's unlikely that you'll compete in the NBA if you're five feet five inches in height. You've got no chance of winning the heavyweight championship of the world if you're naturally a middleweight. And it's almost impossible for a male tennis player to compete successfully on the ATP Tour if he is under five feet five inches tall.

Soccer has no such restrictions. Arguably, the two best players in the world, at the time of writing, are Lionel Messi and Ronaldo. Two men with completely contrasting body shapes. One, a physical specimen, the other lacking height and strength. But both at the pinnacle of the sport.

Being small never ruled out Messi or Xavi Hernandez or Iniesta. Growing up at La Masia, the Barcelona Academy, they could have weaved a different internal story. They could have told themselves that they weren't big enough to play top-level football. They could have given into thoughts that restricted their progression.

But they didn't. They believed in the abilities they had – both their physical and their mindset abilities. And with the help of their coaching staff they set about becoming the very best they could be. They dug away at the bottomless pit that is human potential.

Are you digging away at your bottomless pit? Do you see yourself as a no-limit footballer?

Soccer is a game of thinking. It's a game of awareness, anticipation and decision-making. It's a game of speed of thought. It's a game of intelligence – of tactical understanding and of pattern recognition. It's a game that requires knowing what to do at the right time – with confidence. It's a complex game, impossible to master.

The physically gifted aren't granted an exclusive licence to make great decisions. The physically talented aren't the only ones who can learn to play intelligently. Everyone can improve these types of skills. So, everyone has a bottomless pit of potential.

You have to train, you have to play, and you have to think like there are no limits to your ability.

No-One Really Knows

No-one really knows just how good you can be. Everyone is guessing. No-one knows how much you can improve your skills. No-one really knows where your final destination in soccer is.

I want you to see your potential as limitless. You have talent in abundance. You have the ability to be the best you can be, and no-one can tell you just how good that is.

You have to train, you have to play, and you have to think like there are no limits to your ability.

There were plenty who said David Beckham wouldn't make an impact at Real Madrid. But he did! Did current Manchester United defender Chris Smalling give up on his dreams when he played non-league football in England? Of course he didn't! And his persistence paid off – he won a move to one of the biggest clubs in the world.

I have worked with, and continue to work with, players who play one, two and, sometimes, even three divisions below what they are capable of. I strive to help them train and play with no limits. I firmly believe a footballer who spends time thinking about playing football outside perceived limitations will break down self-imposed barriers... fast! I want that for you; in fact, you need to personally insist on it for yourself!

Your Talent, Your Decision

The dreams you have for your game, and the goals you set yourself, are for you – and you alone – to decide. Never let anyone tell you what you can and cannot achieve in soccer.

You have to train, you have to play, and you have to think like there are no limits to your ability.

Nothing and no-one can hold you back. Nothing and no-one can tell you what you can and cannot achieve on the pitch. It is for *you* to decide how good you can be. It is for *you* to decide the limits of your capability. It is for *you* to decide your future in soccer.

Technique Number 1

You have to train, you have to play, and you have to think like there are no limits to your ability.

Chapter 6

Reach for Ronaldo, Stretch for Smith

Let me be very clear.

I'm not saying that everyone who reads this book will lift the World Cup, play Champions League, compete as a professional, get a college scholarship, or represent their County or State team. That's not what I'm saying. How far someone goes in the beautiful game is determined by many factors, some of which are out of your control.

Incredible ability has fallen by the wayside for many reasons – injury, life distractions, a lack of opportunity, bad performances at the wrong time, and sometimes because of plain old bad luck.

I have worked with some players over the years who have shown incredible physical ability, who have enormous dedication, and who have worked diligently on their mindset – but sustained an injury at the wrong time or who have simply lost a little form when their chance to impress was at its highest.

Success in soccer, as it is in life, is complicated! It's not straightforward.

But let me tell you something that I believe *is* straightforward. Something that is, to me, a non-negotiable and a critical essential. Soccer players must reach for their playing dreams and stretch their comfort zone. Soccer players must reach and stretch relentlessly. Soccer players must reach for the best in the world and stretch for their optimal ability no matter who they are and no matter what level they compete at. By doing so, they give themselves the very best opportunity to discover just how good they can be.

They must reach for Ronaldo. That awareness, that first touch, that intelligence, that work ethic, that heading, that movement off the ball and that delivery. They must reach for the World Player of the Year – what does that look like? What does that feel like? What is he thinking on the pitch? What is he seeing? How is he formulating his next move?

They must stretch for Smith – Kelly Smith, one of the greatest players ever to put on soccer boots. That power, that control, that anticipation, that hunger, that shooting. Over 100 caps for the English National team – what does that look like? What does that feel like? What is she thinking on the pitch? What is she seeing? How is she formulating her next move?

seeing? How is she formulating her next move?

They must reach for Ronaldo and they must stretch for Smith. Every soccer player must reach and stretch for the elite – for the best in the world in their position.

Reach and stretch, reach and stretch. Abby Wambach, Yaya Toure, Christine Sinclair, Gareth Bale, Louisa Necib,

Reach and stretch, reach and stretch. Manuel Neuer, Nadine Angerer, Vincent Kompany, Marta, Philipp Lahm…

What do they see? How have they improved themselves as players? What does space mean to them? How much effort do they exert? How do they talk to themselves as they compete? What are they thinking as they warm up? What level of intensity produces their best? How do they relax before a game?

The trajectory of your soccer may well be determined by the quality of the questions you ask yourself about the games of your models. It may well be determined by the answers you furnish your own game with.

Reach and stretch, reach and stretch, reach and stretch.

Seeing Possibility

Can everyone become Ronaldo or Kelly Smith or another world-class player? Probably not. But that doesn't mean you don't strive to become the best. That doesn't mean you don't try. A footballer will surprise herself daily with the progress she is making when she puts her dreams and ambitions at the forefront of her mind.

Every great soccer player sees possibility in his game and possibility in his hero's game. He *stares* and *steals* and *stretches*.

He *stares* at his role model – someone who plays a few levels or many levels above him – and he marches a relentless beat towards the game of his idol.

He looks at the German goalkeeper Manuel Neuer and sees the strong leap off the ground, the pinpoint perfect timing of a jump that has him soar above the opposition strikers. And he sees Neuer catch and hold the ball like it's a new born baby – like it's his baby – like he *owns* the ball, and it is no-one else's.

He makes a decision about the skills in Neuer's play that he wants to *steal* from the great goalkeeper. Then this soccer player stretches. He fixes his focus firmly on developing the actions and movements that help Neuer catch a crossing ball.

You have to reach and stretch, reach and stretch

If you are a defender, you may choose to look at Ali Krieger, the American World Cup winner.

Look and stare, look and stare. Look at her positioning, stare at her movement, look at how she checks opposition and ball. Stare at how she times her tackles to perfection. Look and stare, look and stare.

A midfielder could look at Toni Kroos, the German and Real Madrid footballer. He could look and stare, look and stare. Kroos shows strength, movement, awareness, positioning. He shows will and want. He portrays confidence and assuredness. Look and stare, look and stare.

What you see and reflect on in your brain plays an important role in your progress as a soccer player. This is because your brain has mirrors. When you watch you shape your brain. By projecting a strong, vivid image of excellence through your eyes you start to sculpt the games of model players into your mind.

Look and stare, look and stare then reach and stretch, reach and stretch

The Imagination of a Champion

The soccer players who reach and stretch on a daily basis not only carve out the kind of skills that separate the best from the rest, they also create a mental blueprint that helps them manage the emotional ups and downs that soccer delivers.

I've worked with young players who have been dropped from their Under 12 team because they were deemed not big or strong enough. I've worked with Premier League Academy scholars who have been released because the coaching staff didn't see a future for them at the very top level of the game. And I've worked with amateur footballers (players who compete for fun but who take the game seriously) who have made terrible mistakes leading to goals that have relegated their team or have lost cup matches.

My message to them is reach and stretch. You keep reaching and stretching. Nothing and no-one stops you from improving. Nothing and no-one diverts your focus away from your bottomless pit of potential.

Stuff happens in football. Mistakes are made. Own goals are conceded. Easy opportunities are missed. No matter, just keep reaching and stretching.

This is what the English striker Carlton Cole did when his career was taking a

downward turn (there is more about my work with Carlton Cole in *Soccer Tough*). When he found himself in the reserve team for West Ham he decided enough was enough. He had seen his career go from a very promising youngster in the Chelsea first team to a striker who was struggling for any game time at all.

Carlton decided to reach and stretch. He worked every day in the gym and he analysed his game with then West Ham manager Gianfranco Zola. He spoke with me on a weekly basis to improve his mindset and he took time after every training session to practice his skills.

After just a few months, his reaching and stretching started to pay off. He won a place in the first team and he started to score goals. And just shy of 18 months into his newfound commitment, he won a place in the England international team. He made his debut against Spain, the World Champions at the time.

Carlton could have chosen to give up. He could have chosen to play in the West Ham reserves and spend his career wondering what could have been. He didn't. He decided to reach and stretch to see just how good he could be. In my eyes he found his personal brand of excellence – he became a champion.

Champion sports competitors balance the vision they have for their game in the now and the future. They place one eye on the present striving to compete as best they can every day in training and every week on match day. But they have the other eye directed towards the future – reaching and stretching towards their hero, their idol, their model, their future perfect.

No matter what happens on the pitch, you carry on. Win or lose you carry on. You carry on reaching. You carry on stretching. That is what champions do. That is what Gold Medal performances are made of. That is the only way you can truly discover how much ability you really have, and how good you can really become!

Technique Number 6

Reach and Stretch Relentlessly!

Practice Pep Talk

You have to train, you have to play and you have to think like there are no limits to your ability.

Do you think – when you start to do this – that you'll hold yourself the same as before? Do you think you'll act the same? When you ingrain the belief that you have a bottomless pit of potential, do you think you'll talk to yourself in the same way?

When you start to train, to play and to think like there are no limits to your ability then you'll conduct yourself differently on and off the pitch. Your self-belief will rise higher and fall slower. Your focus will stabilise and distractions will shift quicker. Destructive emotions will flat-line and your perseverance will strengthen.

You have to train, you have to play and you have to think like there are no limits to your ability.

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To be the best you can be you have to profile the next level.

It's not enough to immerse yourself in a no-limits mentality. You have to live it and breathe it and sleep it. This means taking a long, hard and honest look at your current game. Ask yourself the tough question: "What does better look like?" Examine your strengths and borrow from the best – champions of tomorrow learn from the champions of today.

Write down a template for your future game – set your course for success. It's one thing to want it, it's another thing to put into practice *exactly* what you have to do to get to your destination. Being a student of *the* game and a student of *your* game is motivation wrapped in a layer of intelligence – you need to know what you need to magnify and what you need to improve.

To be the best you can be, you have to profile the next level.

*

To reach your own version of personal excellence, you have to design your

training script and take small steps every month to build the game of your dreams.

Once you've profiled the next level, and compiled the evidence, you can build your training script. A script is a narrowed focus – it's a smaller version of your profile and it encompasses the specific areas you're going to work on for the coming month.

The champions in sport do this. They breakdown their game to the exact components they need to improve then they take to the training pitch or court or course and take action.

I want this for your game. I want you to go and execute. I want you to go and get better. Go and train and go and practice with passion, with precision, and with a vision directed towards perfection.

To be the best you can be, you have to design your training script and take small steps every month to build the game of your dreams.

*

The quality and efficiency of your training is the biggest determinant of your progress in soccer.

Train deliberately. Train on purpose. Train with intention.

Practicing with intensity is not enough. You have to take ownership of your training script by focusing your mind tightly on improving the skills you want to improve. This will be uncomfortable at first, but that's okay. The art of becoming better is to shift the uncomfortable into the zone of comfortable. The art of improving is to over-think a skill until you do it automatically and naturally.

Getting better at your soccer is as a result of combining focus, commitment, drive and comfort-busting action.

The quality and efficiency of your training is the biggest determinant of your progress in soccer.

*

Create race tracks for *every* part of your game.

Your brain is the electricity charging your improvement programme, and your

Your brain is the electricity charging your improvement programme, and your inner world is a representation of your outer reality. Whenever you take to the practice pitch – to train with intention – you are wiring your brain for excellence. You are turning pathways into roadways into motorways and finally into race tracks.

Your goal should be simple – create race tracks for *every* part of your game. Train your script with the intention to build race tracks for your ball control. Build race tracks for your positional awareness. Build race tracks for your movement. Build for your first touch, for your tackling, for your passing. Build and build and build those race tracks.

Create race tracks for every part of your game.

*

Reach and stretch relentlessly.

A champion craves to become the best she can possibly be. She is hungry for better.

If you win – get better. If you lose – get better. If you're subbed – get better. If you are coming back from injury – get better. If you're towards the end of your footballing career – get better. If you've been released from a club – get better. If you've had a terrible training session – get better.

A champion aches for better. She has a vision of improvement that pierces her mind and fires her belly.

If you've lost the final – get better. If you've had a shocking performance – get better. If the coach says "Not good enough" – get better. If a team mate digs you out – get better. If you have no winners' medals – get better.

Reach and stretch, reach and stretch, reach and stretch for your dream game.

Reach and stretch relentlessly.

Prepare – Introduction You cannot force a great game. You cannot force a win. Performances are often made or broken in the lead up to a match, and your mindset during those days, hours and minutes before you grace the pitch is as important as it is during the competition itself.

World-class preparation begins with knowledge. It starts by knowing exactly what you have to do to give yourself the very best chance to compete at your peak. In football, you win in your mind first, then you go play.

There can be no shortcuts. You must demand detail and you must stress the small things. They matter.

Soccer players are accustomed to warming up their bodies for play but I want more for you and your football. I want you to become the very best in the world at warming up your mindset. I want you to fine-tune your mental game in the lead up to a match. I want you to turn up the volume of focus and confidence whilst maintaining the appropriate balance between intensity and relaxation.

In this section, you'll learn how to:

- Prime your confidence and stock up on energy

- Have a specific individual plan for the match ahead - Get ready to manage yourself on the pitch

- Create pictures in your mind without fuss and without deliberation - Have a routine for matchday – one that builds and stores excellence In this section, I'm going to introduce you to a different language. Too many soccer players obsess over shooting, ball control and tackling without a passion for the thoughts and attitudes that underpin consistent high performance. I want my language to become your passion. I want you to embrace the concept of energy and confidence bars. I want you to be lightning quick on your self-talk and body controllers. I want you charging your inner batteries on a weekly basis.

I hope these new ideas excite and inspire you. I hope they lead to the sensational soccer you dream of. So let's prepare to play!

Chapter 12

How Marley is learning to Mentally Contrast

Marley Watkins sighs down the phone – he's heard my question before.

"I'm going to stick to my script no matter what," he says, in subtle Welsh tones. "I'm going to stick to my script like glue. If I'm not getting on the ball then I'll make sure I'm on my controllers. I'll shout my script to myself and I'll keep great body language."

I understand his fatigue – I ask him the same thing every week and he responds with the same answers week in, week out. It's the habit I've tried to build into our relationship – the habit that will help him become the very best he can be.

The current Barnsley FC winger keeps talking, "If I make a mistake I'll use my self-talk and my body controller. I know my body language is so important, I have to keep on my toes. The full-back is a good one – really good positioning and he makes it hard for a winger to play a good final ball. I have to stay aggressive in everything I do, no let up."

As he speaks, I can hear the Barnsley winger's mind churning away. He's picturing what he's saying. He's mentally seeing his challenges and the problems he's going to face.

"If the referee makes a bad decision what are you going to do?" I ask. "What if you're not getting on the ball? If your team mates are having a poor game how are you going to react? What if you miss a great opportunity to score?"

My questions dial in to the kind of mentality I want him to display on the pitch. I'm hard on Marley. I'm tough because I care and because I want him to excel in every game. He can't play his best game all the time, but there is no reason why he shouldn't have his bars, his controllers, and his script locked and loaded for the match ahead.

The questions I ask him might seem strange to you, perhaps a little negative. But I'm asking Marley these kinds of questions on purpose. I want Marley to think flexibly about the upcoming game – I want him to be able to mentally contrast.

A Different Way of Thinking

It does make me chuckle when I hear a player tell me that they don't need to

speak to me because they ‘think positively’ already. It makes me smile because the perception they have (that I’m a ‘positive thinking guru’) couldn’t be further from the truth.

As you’ve already read in section one of this book, I help players to be able to think flexibly about their game. I teach them to maintain confidence while at the same time being able to look unemotionally at the cold hard facts of their game. They aren’t going to improve if they don’t study their weaknesses.

To all those players who believe that sport psychology is about ‘positive thinking’ I’m here to tell you that you’re wrong. Sport psychology teaches the discipline of thinking flexibly. Sport psychology helps you learn how to think in a robust, practical way.

It may surprise you to hear that I don’t want you to limit your thinking going into a match. I don’t want you to solely direct your thoughts towards the positive. Sure, I *do* want you to envision playing at your very best. And of course I think it’s essential to picture perform your script with perfection. But the very best preparation encompasses a vital look at what you’ll do when it goes wrong.

This is something a very influential psychologist called Gabrielle Oettingen has researched for many years. She calls it mental contrasting.

She argues that to give yourself the very best possible chance to achieve the goals you set yourself in life you have to spend a little time thinking about what can go wrong. You have to spend a little time focusing on the obstacles that can prevent you from achieving your goal.

So, for example, if someone has a goal of getting fit they should think about the obstacles that stand between them and being fit. Examples include being too tired to go to the gym or being invited out to eat by friends. Oettingen argues that to give yourself the best possible chance of reaching your goal of getting fit, you need to have strategies to deal with these obstacles. In the case of our examples above, you might choose to have a few pieces of gym equipment at home so if you don’t feel like heading out to the gym you can do things in the comfort of your living room. If you’ve been invited to a meal out, you might choose to have a salad rather than anything too fatty (no matter how tough that can be!).

So why is all of this relevant to you the soccer player? Well every game of football will present obstacles and tests that can prevent you from executing your

script and playing to your very best ability. Think about what some of them might be. Poor refereeing decisions, the great play of the opposition, a terrible set of performances from your team mates, horrible weather, and a poor pitch are a few that you might consider.

What are you going to do if any of the above happens? How are you going to react and respond? What's your next move? How can you keep your confidence and energy bars high? What will it look like if you employ your controllers with speed?

Brainstorming how you'll deal with the problems and challenges you'll face on the pitch is a detail you can't ignore if you want to be soccer tough. It's a five-minute mental procedure that separates champions from the runners up.

What Am I Going To Do?

When Marley Watkins is preparing to play, he opens his mind to what might happen. He knows that games of football don't always go according to plan. He knows that he's human and his body won't always feel attuned to excellence. He knows he has to battle hard to stay focused, confident and in control. Because of this, he commits himself every week to the process of mental contrasting:

- I might have a few bad touches in warm up – what am I going to do?

- I might give the ball away early in the game – what am I going to do?

- My midfield might struggle to get the ball to me – what am I going to do?

- My first cross might go into row Z – what am I going to do?

- I might miss a glorious chance to score – what am I going to do?

By asking himself "What am I going to do" he's creating a blueprint in his mind that he can carry into the game with him.

"I'm going to be relentless on my controllers. I'm going to be quick, speedy on my body controller and I'm going to be ruthless with my self-talk."

You see, Marley Watkins isn't going to have a perfect game every match. He's not even going to have a great game every match. But he's going to give himself a great opportunity to shine by taking the time to imagine the struggles and exertions he'll experience during his upcoming games. The cocktail of armchair solutions he blends in his mind will help him be the very best he can be on matchday. They'll help him be an uncompromising, tough and brutal competitor.

A Brutal Competitor

In the week leading up to the 2015 Scottish FA Cup Final, Marley and I had been talking about being a brutal competitor. It was, after all, the biggest game of his career.

Before Marley arrived at Barnsley to play in the English League Division One, he had played for Inverness in the Scottish Premier League. During the 2014/15 season he had been one of the standout players and had been rewarded with a cup final appearance against Scottish club Falkirk.

Marley told me over the phone, a few days before the game, that he wanted to make a big impact. He wanted to cap an outstanding season by scoring and being the man of the match. I was quick to respond and get him focusing on the things he could control:

“What are the things that are going to stop you playing well? What will stop you being the best player on the pitch?”

Marley had a little think and then responded, “I know the defenders are going to be really up for it. They are strong and they’re going to get tight to me. I’m not going to have much space or much room.”

“Okay, so what are you going to do to combat that, Marley?” I asked him.

“I’m going to work all week on my movement – in this game I’ve got to be a step ahead and I’ve got to play with more energy than ever. I’ve got to keep my self-talk real strong and make sure I’m on my toes at all times. If we go a goal down I can’t give up – I have to have a relentless mindset.”

I loved that answer, and I sent him a text message straight after our call to remind him of what he had said to me. I asked him to look at the message daily. I wanted him to see his own words every day leading into the game.

On the day of the game, Marley was ready. He had mentally contrasted during the week and he was prepared for anything the Falkirk defenders wanted to throw at him.

And so, when the game kicked off, Marley did what he had told me he was going to do. He was sharp and alive and athletic. He played head up and on his toes. Midway through the first half, his team mate found him with a through ball that split the defence open. Marley, playing with energy and confidence, got on the end of the pass and rounded the goalkeeper. He then gently caressed the ball into the back of the net.

As he ran off towards the corner flag in celebration, he let out a scream of delight. The dozens of conversations he had had on the phone with me about his mindset – about confidence and energy and focus and controllers and dealing with distractions – had all been worth it. He was discovering his own personal brand of excellence.

And that day will stick in the mind of Marley Watkins for the rest of his life. Inverness went on to claim the cup with Marley making an assist for the winning goal in the second half. He was crowned man of the match at the end of the game. He had been a brutal and brilliant competitor.

The Marley in You

This is what I want for you. I want you to be an uncompromising, tough and brutal competitor. I want you to do what Marley does – I want you to mentally contrast your matches before you go and play.

When ‘stuff’ happens on the pitch, I want your mind to be clear and nimble – not burdened by distraction. I want your brain beating with speed and attuned to solution. The past is over, the last second has gone – what next, what next?

And with the technique of mental contrasting a new firm favourite, you are ready to play. Your internal batteries are charged, your bars are filled, your controllers are ready to fire, your script has been written and you have solutions for every eventuality. Now you are prepared. Now you are ready to go be a great individual player and an incredible team mate. Now you are ready to go play soccer tough.

Technique Number 12

Picture the bad to come up with the good – mentally contrast before every game

Prepare Pep Talk

Too many soccer players leave confidence to chance. They aren't fussy about their confidence. They aren't purposeful with this most important of inner feelings. They can be similarly casual about their energy. They make assumptions. They presume they'll turn up to a game and feel full of energy.

Be intentional with your confidence. And be deliberate with your energy. Get to know exactly what actions, behaviours, attitudes, processes and thoughts help you prepare to play with confidence and energy.

Leave no stone left unturned. Like a detective, hunt down the clues that leave you crackling with confidence and find the evidence that helps electrify your energy.

Whatever you uncover, go to work on your confidence and on your energy bars everyday. Anxiety and lethargy are the alternatives, and they are not the fit of a champion footballer.

Raise your confidence and energy bars daily

*

I know you want to win. That's what the game is all about right? But what are you going *to do* to win? Soccer is a game that is driven by process, by actions and specific mental qualities that give a great performance and subsequent victory their strongest opportunity.

If you're a striker, I know you want to score. If you're a defender or goalkeeper, I know you want to keep a clean sheet. What are you going to *do* to achieve these outcomes? They are out of your control and it is your job to focus your mind on the things you *can* control.

I want you to write out a script and go and execute it. When you make a mistake come back to your script. When you find yourself thinking in an unhelpful way come back to your script. When you're reflecting on past plays or dwelling on things that didn't go the way you wanted them to go, shift back to your script.

That is mental toughness. That is intelligent soccer. That is controlled football.

Your goal for a game of soccer is to go and execute your script – performance and outcome will take care of themselves

and outcome will take care of themselves.

*

As much as your psychology affects your physiology, so your physiology affects your psychology.

Your body can be used for more than just swerving and heading, passing, shooting and tackling. It's equipped with the power to help you maintain confidence and energy. It's armed with the capability to help you stay focused and alert, ready to compete every second of every game.

Stand tall. Get on your toes. Dance your feet. Lift your head, open your eyes and look around you. These are functions of your body controller. Use them. Use them when your distraction scatters your concentration. Use them when you start to feel flat or despondent. Use them when your energy is sapping or when your confidence begins to ebb.

Use your body controller at all times to keep your bars filled and to execute your match script.

*

Your self-talk is different to your thinking. Your thoughts *happen* to you, you *do* your self-talk.

This is an important difference. Champions are accomplished at talking to themselves as they compete. Their self-talk lengthens their stride, sustains their drive and reminds them of what's important.

Combine your body controller with your self-talk controller. Say and do as you compete. Say and do, say and do, say and do…

Use your self-talk in combination with your body controller to keep your energy and confidence bars high and to focus on your script.

*

What you see can be what you get.

I want you to see powerful inner pictures of the football factors that you are in full control of. I want you to take a little time daily to see yourself competing with your energy and confidence bars crammed. I want you to picture playing

With your energy and confidence bars crammed. I want you to picture playing your match script. And I want you to see yourself using your controllers on the pitch.

Charge your inner batteries. Create a mental blueprint for the things you can control. Power up your processes so that you let your performance take care of itself. In this way, you spray perfect and precise processes on your brain and nervous system.

See your script, feel your script. See your bars, feel your bars. See your controllers in action. Feel your controllers in action.

Charge your inner batteries daily

*

Prepare to be a brutal competitor on the pitch. Engage in mental contrasting.

Know exactly what it is you are going to do when it goes wrong. And it *will* go wrong. Shots will be missed and mistakes will be made. The weather will turn and the opposition will play some great soccer.

Irrespective of the level you play football at, things will go wrong. Brainstorm your solutions before you set foot on the pitch. Ask yourself what you are going to do in every given circumstance.

If you go a goal down, what are you going to do? If your team mates are playing poorly, what are you going to do? If you lose confidence, what are you going to do?

Be an intelligent footballer. Be a soccer player ready to take on the lows of the game. As the match unfolds, there will be plenty of challenging moments and you need to strategise *before* you play to be a brutal competitor *while* you play.

Picture the bad to come up with the good – mentally contrast before every game.

Perform – Introduction You've been practicing your game, and you've been using your training script to improve your skills. You've laid down your match script, filled your bars, and charged your inner batteries. You have your controllers to hand and now you're ready to play. Now you're ready to compete.

This is the time the best – most meticulous – preparation can go wrong. Soccer players can get tense. They can become anxious the closer they get to kick off. Doubt and worry can creep up on them, fog their mind, choke their freedom and envelope their game in fear.

Relax… Stay calm… Be patient

I know you want to play well but you can't force your best game. You can't force greatness. What you *can* do is complete a series of tasks before you kick off that will optimise your body and mind for the game ahead.

This section starts by introducing you to the concept of a matchday mindset – a philosophy to compete by, and a set of habits filtered into a routine that you can execute as the match draws nearer.

Then we'll discuss your in-game mindset: - How to deal with unhelpful, destructive thinking on the pitch… quickly!

- The advantage of playing with fun, freedom and focus - What to think and when to do

- Performing confidently under pressure The great players see an opening because their mind is open to that opening. A great defender has a mind that is aware of the space the striker might run into. The great midfielder has a mind that is aware of the space that he can exploit. The great striker has a mind that is aware of the space that she can score from. All these players have a mind that is clear and calm and unfogged by doubt and worry.

Stay calm… Relax… Be patient

All you can be is the very best you can be on the pitch. That is all. That is all you can ask from yourself. That is all you can demand from yourself. This section will give you some powerful philosophies and strategies to make that a reality

will give you some powerful philosophies and strategies to make that a reality.

Chapter 16

Playing 80/20

I ask my clients to play in the present moment as best they can. To my mind, the present moment (within the context of soccer) means the now and the next five seconds.

A mind truly fixed in the present doesn't dwell on what's been. It doesn't reflect on the goal that's just gone in or the pass that was made a few moves earlier. It doesn't orientate itself to the controversial refereeing decision from 5 minutes earlier. And it moves on from the heavy tackle made that led to a yellow card not long before.

Similarly, attention in the present has no room for the future beyond the next five seconds. The tough second half isn't relevant when you're immersed in the first throws of the game. What the coach will say to you at half-time is something the present mind cannot abide. Playing now and reading the next five seconds is the preoccupation of the champion soccer player.

This is harder to do than many appreciate. The brain loves to direct itself forwards and backwards. It enjoys dwelling on the worst of what's just been. It likes to project ahead to the problems the game holds.

I ask my clients to practice playing soccer in the present moment every time they take to a pitch. Holding onto a match script, a training script, using controllers, and squashing ANTs all help to make this tough-to-reach state possible. Becoming accomplished at self-regulation and self-control is an everyday challenge that you have to try and win.

The battle to find this state of mind is something that Henry Molaison never struggled with. In fact, he slipped into it all day, every day.

You have probably never heard of Henry. I don't think he ever kicked a soccer ball and I'm not sure he was even a fan of the beautiful game. But in spite of this, his intriguing (and sad) story provides us with a lesson of how footballers should enjoy playing the game. Here is the story of Henry Molaison.

The Molaison Memory

In 1953, at the age of 27, Henry Molaison lost his memory and forever stayed in the present moment. It happened after a surgical procedure to try to cure

the present moment. It happened after a surgical procedure to try to cure epileptic seizures that he'd been suffering since he was 16-years-old.

The operation attempted to remove the parts of the brain that doctors thought were causing his fits. Unfortunately, the procedure went wrong and Henry lost what psychologists call his declarative memory.

Whilst Henry retained a little about life before having surgery, every experience gained *after* the operation – facts presented to him and things that happened to him-were forgotten within 30 seconds. He could remember some things about his childhood, but if you had asked him to pick up a book and 30 seconds later recall what he had just read, he would be unable to do it.

Worst of all, his caregivers had to introduce themselves to him every day as he had no idea who they were. The doctors and nurses that looked after him were forever strangers to Henry.

Amazingly, his friendly personality and intelligent demeanour remained intact, and he allowed psychologists to examine him to learn more about the human brain and memory. And there was something, in particular, they found interesting.

It had become apparent that whilst Henry had lost his ability to remember consciously, not all of his daily memory faculties had been destroyed. It appeared that he was able to learn new skills without really knowing it.

This was demonstrated through specially designed psychology tests, one of which was a motor skill test. Specifically, Henry had to draw lines between points in star-like patterns. He was asked to do this several times over the course of a day and as he did so, he would make fewer errors the more he practiced it.

In short, he was learning a new motor skill despite not being consciously aware of doing anything different or anything better.

What these tests demonstrated was that different memories are housed in different areas of the brain. Conscious memories require the area that was destroyed in Henry's brain. But memories of learned motor skills reside in a different area of the brain – in the deeper levels of the unconscious mind.

Two Brains, Two States of Play

Champion athletes perform the majority of the time using this unconscious mind. It's the area that holds all the memories of their skills that they build from training and playing and practicing. This area enables them to just do! No

thinking, just doing!

Take a few minutes to hold a video image of how the best footballers on the planet play. They play loose and free and uninhibited. They enjoy unrestricted motion and boundless movement.

When you watch a Messi or Wambach or Ronaldo play well, they are – by and large – playing unconsciously. They immerse themselves in a bubble of unconscious play. They are trusting the repetition gained from thousands of hours of training. There is very little thinking, there is a lot of doing. There is very little judgment, there is a lot of action.

The mazy runs that skilful players make aren't met with a barrage of noise from the brain. They are not talking their way through the opposition, they are simply going through them. They are not saying, "Go left, side-foot right, stop, start, flick." They are just doing these things on auto-pilot, relying on unconscious memory as they have been practiced so many times before.

When you play soccer, I'd like you to compete most of the time in an unconscious mode. I'd like you to allow the deeper parts of your brain to guide you. You've trained hard and I want you to trust that training. Have fun and be free. Enjoy the sensation of 'just doing'.

"But hold on," I hear you cry. "You've given me a self-talk controller. I now have a script. In the last chapter, you told me that Yannick Bolasie and all your other clients 'talk' to themselves before they play and as they compete. You've told me to think about my body language and my bodily actions. You've asked me to use my controllers to keep my energy bars high. Now you're telling me not to think? Now you're telling me to just do? Please explain."

The Unconscious/Conscious Sweet-spot

I ask players to play unconsciously 80% of the time. I want them to play consciously 20% of the time. I want them to strike a keen balance between their unconscious and conscious. I'm going to use examples from another sport to highlight what I mean.

In tennis, Roger Federer or Serena Williams play 80/20. 80% of the time they trust their training and let their shots take care of themselves. They don't think about how far they're going to take the racket back and they don't consciously focus on the angle the racket head hits the ball. They let the motion take care of itself. If they were to overly think about these things during play they'd never

get the ball over the net!

However, there are things that champion tennis players *do* consciously think about. They will have a set of tactics to beat an opponent. They will be constantly aware of these tactics. Tennis players will also choose where they're going to serve the ball – they consciously consider a type of serve to hit. And players will also use their controllers. You may have seen them at Wimbledon or at Flushing Meadows talking to themselves as they start to lose or encourage themselves as they win a few games in a row. They will know that a slump in body language is going to cause them to get too down on themselves. They will consciously keep themselves upbeat, ready and sharp.

Tennis players compete 80/20. If this balance is lost, it prevents them playing at their best. Too much instinct (90/10) and they'll lose their ability to think appropriately in the moment. They'll make sloppy decisions and they'll fail to recognise when they need to gee themselves up, calm themselves down, or shift their focus in a different direction. In contrast, too much thought and an over-control of shots will prevent them from playing a free flowing, winning game. Their shots will be erratic and their mind fogged and preoccupied.

This is no different in football. I don't think there's any argument that a game of soccer needs to be played without too much thought. It requires an instinctive mind. But a footballer needs to use her conscious mind as well. She needs to set out a game plan that includes the tactical, technical and mental components of the game, and she needs to condense them into simple-to-remember prompts that will focus her mind come kick off. This is the match script. She needs to observe when she has an ANT and intentionally squash it. She needs to recognise when she's switched off and re-focus her mind quickly. She needs to keep herself confident and energised as she competes.

Soccer players who compete 100% unconsciously can make mistakes without ever realising it. They can be sloppy. They can lose personal battles time and time again without striving to do anything to change the situation.

100% unconscious is directionless and too out of control. A soccer player needs an inner map of the behaviours he wants and the self-regulation techniques he can employ should he experience ANTs.

Xavi

When Xavi was growing up at La Masia, the Barcelona Academy, he was always thinking. Whenever he took to the pitch, he was thinking. The coaches

set up training exercises to force him to think, but it was his own personal demands that drove him to “Think, think, think”.

He would think about space – finding space. He would think about the movement of the opposition. He would think about the movement of his team mates. He would think about body shape, positioning, and the most effective runs to make.

He would train 50/50 – 50% unconsciously, 50% consciously. Of course, when he plays now this has calmed to 80/20, but for him to play to the very best of his ability he will still demand some thinking from himself. He will still look around and play 20% consciously.

The mazy runs he makes and the instinctive passes he executes will have been embedded into the depths of his brain after so many years of practice and performing, so for 80% of the match he is looking and doing. But for him to be a match winner he still needs to stick to a script with plays related to finding space, he still needs to keep himself focused and playing with freedom. He still needs to squash any ANTs that may arise as the game progresses.

Consciously Unconscious

Maybe the best way to describe how I want you to play is *consciously unconscious*. I want you to utilise your *conscious* mind to get the very most from your *unconscious* performance.

Play to compete with fun and freedom. Express and enjoy yourself. Be loose and confident and uninhibited. Look and do, look and do, look and do.

But to be able to stay in an unconscious mental state of ‘look and do’, and to get the very most out of this state, it’s important to use your controllers to stay alert, alive and focused. It’s important to remind yourself of your script from time to time. It’s important to consciously squash any ANTs that your brain pushes through to your awareness.

The match kicks off. You unconsciously start to move and look around you. Even in the first minute, you can consciously use your self-talk controller to remind yourself of your script. Now you look and do – no thought – just look and do. Then, as you see the ball break up the pitch you unconsciously make your run – you look and do. The winger crosses it in and you automatically leap for the ball and get your head on it, but it goes wide. You hold your head in your hands for a

couple of seconds, then you consciously remind yourself that you have to get back into your position quickly. You tell yourself you'll get another chance soon – great self-talk to keep yourself confident and focused.

The champion soccer player uses his self-talk and body controllers to keep himself going, keep himself focused, keep himself confident, and keep himself at the right intensity whilst competing unconsciously. He gets that magical 80/20 combo of excellence as he plays. He uses his conscious mind to get the very most out of his natural unconscious game.

Check-Ins

One effective way to play consciously unconscious is to consistently monitor your mindset as you compete.

I ask my players to have regular check-ins as they perform. When the ball is out of play, I want them to ask themselves, "Am I sticking to my script? Am I using my controllers? Am I keeping my energy bars full?" I want them to become accustomed to monitoring their script, controllers, and bars to get the very most from their unconscious performance.

These check-ins can be decisive and quick. There isn't much time in a game of soccer to dwell on how well you're doing or how the game is unfolding. It's not a sport like golf where the pace of play allows for deliberation and unhurried reflection.

Start becoming skilled at the speedy check-in. The more you do it, the quicker you'll get at it. When the ball is up the other end of the pitch, when it's out of play, or when there is a short break in play, turn up the volume of your thoughts related to your script, your controllers, and bars. Go conscious on your unconscious.

Of course, the easiest and most obvious time to check-in is during half time. This is when you can give your game a thorough examination. Rather than giving way to the emotion of the score or the quality of yours and your team's performance, create an inner assessment of how well you're sticking to your script. Ask yourself where your bars are and how well you're using your controllers to be the very best you can be.

Half time is the period to go conscious. It's the time to analyse the good and the not so good. I strongly advise keeping this analysis related to your script, bars and controllers. Avoid getting overly complicated with your assessment – you'll

only confuse yourself.

If your coach has some feedback, listen keenly. It's important to add your coach's thoughts to your script. If you have to make a change to your script then accept it – be flexible. The coach is in charge and he or she is providing you with a window into what better looks like.

Once it comes time to play the second half, be ready to go consciously unconscious again. Move your feet, get on your toes, lift your head up and prepare to play with fun and freedom. Turn up the volume of your focus and mentally have your script to hand so your conscious mind can steer you in the right direction for the next half.

Pressure Play

The footballer who is ready to play consciously unconscious – who is ready to perform 80/20 – is one who can get the very most from her performance. She can be flexible. When momentum is with her team, she can ride the wave of unconscious confidence. And when momentum shifts against her team – which inevitably will happen several times in every game – she can check-in with her conscious thoughts by using her controllers to deal with the pressure that is placed upon her and her team mates.

Champion footballers are pressure players. And pressure players have a keen mix of the instinctive and the deliberate. To be the very best you can be, you have to learn to play under the most intense pressure, whether that's a cup final, a promotion or relegation battle, a trial game or a match played in front of hundreds or thousands of fans. We'll now explore how you can learn to be a better soccer player under pressure.

Technique Number 16

Play 80/20 – use your conscious mind to get the most out of your unconscious game

Perform Pep Talk

How you behave, and subsequently perform on the pitch, is dominated by the hormones you release inside of you. Your inside drives your outside!

I want you to relax before you compete. Too many soccer players become agitated, tight and tense before kick-off. I want you to be calm and clear. I want you cool and collected.

Now you're relaxed, I want you to start building that winning feeling. How? You need a matchday routine. You need a reliable set of procedures that help you get into the right frame of mind.

Start by picturing a successful script. Then rev up the intensity of your preparations by using your controllers during your warm up. Get on your toes and become alert, alive and lively. Get your head up, open your eyes and vocalise what you see on the pitch. Make your physical warm up a mental warm up.

Create a match day routine, and make it routine!

*

I want you to be passionate about the sentences and words you use as you play. They help you pay attention. They help you stay alert, alive and lively.

They also help you squash the bugs that infest your soccer brain – ANTs. Automatic Negative Thoughts are silent assassins in the world of football. They de-energise and distract. They sap confidence and arrest the physical, tactical and technical sides of your game.

ANTs need to be squashed. You need to SPOT, STOP and SHIFT the ANTs. You need to SHIFT with speed, without hesitation, so you avoid an infestation of those creepy crawlies.

Squash ANTs with speed.

*

When you play, I want you to play in the style of your script. I want you to use your two controllers to act out your script. I want you to use your self-talk and

your body actions to keep your confidence bar full and maintain your energy bar as best you can.

I also want you to play with fun, freedom and focus. I talk with all my clients about these three F's, and I try to help them get the perfect balance between freedom and focus as our relationship develops.

Play with fun – a smile on your face or a sense of excitement running through your body. Play with freedom – take risks like a champion. And play with focus – build that sense of discipline by sticking to your match script.

It really is that simple. Crank up the volume of fun and enjoy yourself. Be expressive and play with freedom. Focus your mind on your script, your bars and your controllers.

Execute your match script with fun, freedom and focus.

*

Your self-talk is different to your thinking. Your thoughts *happen* to you, whereas you *do* your self-talk.

This is an important difference. Champions are accomplished at talking to themselves as they compete. Their self-talk lengthens their stride, sustains their drive and reminds them of what's important.

Combine your body controller with your self-talk controller. Say and do as you compete. Say and do, say and do, say and do…

Use your self-talk in combination with your body controller to keep your energy and confidence bars high and to focus on your script

*

I want you to play unconsciously, 80% of the time. And I want you to play conscious football 20% of the time. I want you to strike a keen balance between your unconscious and conscious.

Soccer players who compete 100% unconsciously can make mistakes without ever realising it. They can be sloppy. They can lose personal battles time and time again without striving to do anything to change the situation.

To be able to stay in an unconscious mental state of 'look and do', and to get the

very most out of this state, it's important to use your controllers to stay alert, alive and focused. It's important to be ready to bring out your self-talk and body controllers at will.

Play 80/20 – use your conscious mind to get the most out of your unconscious game.

*

Nervenstaerke equals 'strength of nerves'. I want Nervenstaerke under pressure.

I want Nervenstaerke from the first minute to the last minute. I want Nervenstaerke across the pitch from goalkeeper to striker. I want you to build a game that acknowledges the pressure, identifies its presence, and which delivers in the face of it and in spite of it.

To find your Nervenstaerke, I'd like you to rationalise winning and losing, stick to the process, immerse yourself in your script, use your controllers, squash those killer ANTs and play front foot football.

Under pressure, play with Nervenstaerke.

Progress – Introduction

Plateau is the enemy of *progress*. It's a position so many soccer players find themselves in. Their improvement slows. They stop getting better. Frustration sets in.

So what happens? They get stressed. And what do they do? They try harder. But trying harder can tighten your muscles and muddle your mind. So trying harder reinforces the plateau or even makes your performance worse.

Constant improvement as a footballer requires a blend of strategies to improve your skills, to take control on the pitch and to develop your soccer image. Through your training script, your intentional practice and the on-pitch self-control tools I have introduced you to, you now have the ability to grow your skills and execute them consistently under pressure. But the hungry footballer needs more. The hungry footballer *wants* more. This is where your soccer image comes in.

In Soccer Tough I introduced the reader to the concept of the soccer image. In this section of the book we are going to build on these techniques. How you see yourself as a soccer player, your subjective opinion of your game is like a magnet for your true ability. A footballer won't consistently play better than her soccer image.

I'd like all soccer players to get a measurement of their soccer image. I think knowing how you see yourself as a footballer is imperative to your progress. The first chapter of this section provides you with a handy measurement scale to get to know exactly where your soccer image lies. Now I want you to progress this and here is how:

- Know how to analyse a game effectively and know when to be tough on yourself without destroying your confidence

- Get yourself physically fit, because just as your mind affects your body so your body influences your mind

- Use your memory and imagination to bolster your soccer image

- Speak to yourself in a manner that helps you deal with tough times and continue to build a positive soccer image

There are so many ways to shape your soccer image. It may be invisible to

others but it’s the foundation of progress for you. You have to see yourself capable of getting where you want to go if you want to give yourself a chance to get there. We will start by measuring this most important of personal qualities.

Chapter 21

To Remember, To Dream

In Soccer Tough, I introduced the reader to the importance of memory and imagination in soccer. I want players to be able to remember themselves at their very best and I want them to spend time envisioning their dream game.

Three years on, and my work with footballers has moved forwards. I have spent time with some of the best players and coaches in the world. I have delivered at conferences and workshops across the globe. And I remain steadfast in my point of view – memory and imagination are the most important ingredients to your soccer image and subsequently to your ability to keep progressing.

By remembering your best, you keep feeding your brain the nourishment it needs to keep learning. Your very best games serve you pictures that help you feel good. When you feel good, your mind opens up to your learning environment.

What does your best game look like? What does it feel like?

And, by remembering your best games, you have an active template to perform highly and consistently time and time again. Etching it into the deeper parts of your brain will help your top performances become who you are as a soccer player. They will shape your soccer image.

"What does my best look like? What does my best feel like? I am alert, alive and lively. I am wide-eyed and aware. I see more and I do more. I feel strong, I feel relentless, I feel athletic and I feel energised. I am my very best game. This is who I am and this is what I do."

See this template time and time again: every day, every week, every month. Make it one of your daily habits and be tough on yourself to make sure you do it. This will ward off the plague of plateau. It will keep your mind and body pumping the feel good chemicals even when you have below average training sessions and performances.

In equal measure, I want you to become addicted to the look and feel of your dream games. What does 10/10 look like? What does 12/10 look like? What does 15/10 look like?

Explore the ridiculous! Mull over the game of the masters. Fixate your focus on

the unrealistic. That's okay to do. Today's imagination is tomorrow's reality.

- *What does it look like to play like Messi? What does it feel like?*

- *What does it look like to play like Neuer? What does it feel like?*

- *What does it look like to play like Abby Wambach? What does it feel like?*

- *What does it look like to play like Asisat Oshoala? What does it feel like?*

Exercise your imagination daily. Support the physical work you're doing on your game by drilling your mind with hope and wonder and curiosity. It doesn't necessarily mean you can play like those players, but it does mean you are doing something practical to get as close to them as you possibly can.

You soccer game is your soccer brain. And you get to shape your soccer brain. You get to *choose* how it is shaped. You can carve it into a centre of excellence by providing it with the right inputs.

The right inputs include your training script. It includes your match script and it includes your controllers. By telling your brain that you are in charge on the practice pitch, and on matchday, then you are shaping a strong soccer image – one that affirms that you are in control.

Other inputs should include the memories of you at your best and the possibility of the future perfect.

- *What does my best game look like? What does my best game feel like?*

- *What will it look like if I play my dream game on Saturday? What will it feel like?*

Every input counts towards the quality of your soccer image. Inputs that are unhelpful and destructive, the ones that are ANTs, subtract from your image. They negatively affect confidence and, subsequently, performance.

Of course this doesn't mean you ignore your weaknesses. We discussed, in Section One, the importance of examining the areas of your game you feel you need to improve. Similarly, when you 'go dark' and analyse your performance after the match you need to explore what went wrong and what wasn't so good. Both of these 'negative' processes are important and they shouldn't be ignored. But they need to be compartmentalised. They need to be short, sharp examinations of your game. At all other times you need to dwell on your strengths, your best games and your dream games. Getting the balance right is crucial if you want to build your soccer image and your self-belief.

A Footballer….

A footballer who believes he has a bottomless pit of potential builds his soccer image. A footballer who goes dark, and analyses his game in the most appropriate manner, builds his soccer image. A footballer who is tough on himself in the right way builds his soccer image. Now, add the tools of memory and imagination to the list of strategies to help bolster your image on a day by day basis.

See the best of the past and predict the best of the future. When you do this, it becomes easier to deal with the challenges you face on and off the pitch. And this is something we're going to work on in our final chapter.

Technique Number 21

Remember to remember and dare to dream

Chapter 22

The Power of Yet!

There are two paths weaving their way into your footballing future. Two paths that start with a subtle difference but gently widen further apart. The horizon looks very different for these journeys.

Path one is the ‘never’ path. The ‘never’ path is the one that takes a soccer player into the land of no improvement. And it’s the path that I’d guess every player takes at some point in their footballing career.

It’s the destructive path. When you tread its turf, waves of frustration or despondency can surge through your body.

- *“I’m never going to get this right”*
- *“I’m never going to get into this team”*
- *“I’m never going to be as good as her”*
- *“I’m never going to impress him”*
- *“I’m never going to master this skill”*
- *“I’m never going to be good enough for a scholarship”*

This path delivers doubt and fires anxiety. It stops you from carrying on when it’s imperative that you do so. It’s the path that damages your soccer image.

There is of course another path to take. This is the ‘yet’ path. It’s the path of champions.

- *“I haven’t made the team… yet!”*
- *“This skill is tough to master. I haven’t got it… yet!”*
- *“I’m not good enough for a scholarship… yet!”*

The ‘yet’ path is one of persistence and perseverance. It’s the path to take if you really want to discover just how good you can be. It’s the path that improves your soccer image.

‘Yet’ is a word I want you to say when you are working on your skills. I want you to incorporate it into your training script. I’d like you to adopt the attitude that there is no ‘never’ and no ‘can’t’. There is only can – you just haven’t got there yet.

there yet.

Remember, you have a bottomless pit of potential, and it is your job to think, to train, and to play like there is no limit to your ability. If you are finding certain skills tough to master, if you feel like giving up, then remind yourself of the power of yet. You just haven't mastered the skill, yet!

This is something that a client of mine has become brilliant at doing. My client, I'll call him Johnny for the purpose of this chapter, used to be a 'never' footballer. As an 18-year-old first year professional at a Premier League club he had displayed a lot of promise – these clubs don't give away professional contracts lightly. But being a first year pro is tough and by the time I'd met him, Johnny was finding it hard going.

Johnny had been one of the best players at the club's Academy, but as a first year pro, unless you are exceptional, you have to start again at the bottom rung of the professional ladder. Joining the development squad (18-21 years of age) he had to be focused and he had to exercise patience.

But finding the game easy as a teenager hadn't helped Johnny become the most patient of footballers. He was hungry for success and he wanted it straightaway. Midway through his first year in the pro ranks, he started to drop in form and fall away. Question marks had started to appear next to his name in his coaches' eyes. Was he really Premier League material? But this was nothing as compared to his own negative inner voice.

During our first session together, it was fairly obvious what we had to focus our work on. Johnny was very despondent and frequently referred to numerous doubts he had about his capability of playing at the very top level of soccer.

"I was so good at the Academy, but now I don't think I'm good enough to be in the Premiership. I don't think I am good enough to get into the first team. I'm never going to improve enough to be good enough to play Premier League football."

The curse of 'never' had hit Johnny hard.

The reality was that Johnny was still the talented young player that coaches had been excited about. And reports from the coaching staff suggested that Johnny was still demonstrating plenty of the skills required to play top flight football. But the environment he was training in was harder than he'd ever experienced… with players who were stronger, quicker, more athletic and technically superior. Johnny responded to this with a 'never' mindset:

- *“I will never be as good as them technically”*

- *“I will never be as strong as them”*

- *“I will never be as fast as them”*

Johnny had to change his language. He had to change his attitude towards the challenges he faced.

- *“I’m not as technically good as them… yet!”*

- *“I’m not as strong as them… yet!”*

- *“I’m not as fast as them… yet!”*

Johnny needed to develop an individual training script and accompany it with the word ‘yet’. He needed the path of persistence and of perseverance. He needed to be disciplined and he needed commitment.

So we got to work. We agreed that the words ‘never’ and ‘can’t’ were ANTs. Johnny decided that whenever he heard himself utter those words under his breath, he would squash them instantly by shifting towards a sentence that contained the word yet. “I’m not there yet” became his mantra.

- *“It wasn’t my best training day today, I’m not there… yet!”*

- *“I made mistakes, but that’s okay, I’m just not there… yet!”*

- *“I haven’t been chosen for the first team… yet!”*

Of course it wasn’t easy to change his ‘never’ mindset but soon Johnny learnt to love his training script. He enjoyed the challenge of working on the details of his game and he stopped becoming overemotional about mistakes and errors. And, as he learnt the power of ‘yet’, how he saw himself as a footballer began to change. His soccer image began to develop.

The Change that Yet Makes

When you start to banish ‘never’ from your soccer speak, and you begin to take the path of ‘yet’, so your soccer image starts to change.

It changes from ‘can’t do’ to a ‘can do’. It changes from destructive pessimism to energising optimism. It changes from a vision of bleak to a vision of peak.

When a soccer player says ‘yet’, they open up a window of opportunity. They get to express themselves rather than feel suppressed. They keep doing the same good things, and the same good habits, daily. They keep going, through failure, until they get to the place they want to be or as close to it as it’s possible for

until they get to the place they want to be or as close to it as it's possible for them to get.

And this is a crucial point. Just because you keep making an effort to get where you want to be as a footballer, and just because you work your backside off, and you work smart, doesn't mean you are definitely going to achieve the very highest goals you set yourself.

You may not reach the first team. You may not win the title. You may never be man of the match. You may never score 20 goals in a season. But always *do the right things daily to give yourself the best opportunity to*. Always squash the ANT that is 'never', and always commit to 'yet'.

You don't know who Johnny is but he's going well. He's played for the first team and he enjoyed his debut. He played well and he battled hard using his match script and his controllers.

Every day, Johnny goes into training with his mind on 'yet'. And when he fails, which he does often, he utters the word 'yet' and reminds himself of another philosophy we've injected into his game. Johnny is big on mastery, and he TAPPs it every day.

TAPP Mastery

Things will go wrong. It's inevitable.

Goals will be scored against you. You'll be dropped. You'll be benched. Your team will go on a run of bad results. The coaching staff will display frustration towards you.

Things will go wrong. It's unavoidable.

You'll misplace passes and mistime tackles. You'll miss great chances and you'll concede a goal and it will be your fault. Your club will bring in a player with great ability who plays in your position and you'll turn up for matches and feel threatened.

Things will go wrong. But you have to deal with them. If you don't, you'll damage your soccer image. If you don't, you'll be wracked with doubt and worry. If you don't, your performances will be affected and your development will be stilted.

When I first start working with a player, I'm quick to tell them that I can't sprinkle magic dust on them. I let them know that there are no guarantees of success. But I let them know that whilst challenges will crop up, I will offer my

success. But I let them know that whilst challenges will crop up, I will offer my support by helping them become passionate about mastery.

Mastery means to be skilful. It means to have control and to have the power to dominate and defeat setbacks. When you think of your soccer, I want you to be consumed by mastery. I want you to be impassioned about getting better – about learning, developing and improving. I want you to work towards dominating. I want you to work towards high skill. I want you to work towards being the very best you can be. And I want you to adopt this attitude irrespective of the trials and tribulations that you encounter within your game, at your club, within your squad and team, and with your coaches.

- *You get dropped – focus on mastery*
- *You lose a match – focus on mastery*
- *You make a couple of mistakes – focus on mastery*
- *You start on the bench – focus on mastery*
- *You have a bad training session – focus on mastery*

When you play competitive sport, and when you mentally sign up for the challenge of becoming a champion in a sport, then difficulties will arise. Every player is different in personality, temperament and personal characteristics, but a solution for everyone – during tough times – is to focus on mastery.

When ‘stuff’ happens, direct your brain towards mastery. Occupy your attention on what *you need to improve and what needs to get better*. Manage your thoughts by reminding yourself of your training script and your constant search for excellence.

It really is that simple. Just focus on getting better at your soccer when faced with adverse conditions or a run of poor form. And to help you get even better at being into mastery, I have a mantra that I ask players to repeat to themselves when they are striving to return to the state of mastery.

I want them to TAPP mastery. The ‘T’ stands for trust. The ‘A’ for accept. The ‘P’ represents patience, while process is the last ‘P’. Let’s look at them one at a time.

Trust

“I trust my ability. I trust what I bring to the field of play every day. I trust my improvement programme.”

Great soccer players have a great amount of trust in themselves, in their everyday training, and in the matchday process they have put in place. They know that, given the right training script and the correct match script, they will continue to improve and to play with greater consistently.

During tough times, footballers need to turn up the volume of trust. They need to trust the everyday soccer tasks they set themselves.

“Stop stressing. I trust the work I am putting in. I trust that every second and every minute of what I do will take me where I want to go in this game.”

Mastery is impossible without trust. If you can’t trust yourself, and you can’t trust the programme of improvement you have put in place, mastery isn’t possible. It’s impossible!

“It’s okay, I made a mistake. I gave a goal away, but it’s okay. I know my training script will cut down those errors. The coach isn’t pleased with me right now but I just have to keep working on my script and focus.”

Accept

Acceptance in football is essential. It’s a forerunner to a relaxed mindset. By accepting that ‘stuff’ happens, you reduce stress and anxiety.

“I accept that ‘stuff’ will happen. I accept that part of soccer is to make mistakes. And I accept that being chosen for the team is out of my control. All I can do is keep striving to get better.”

A soccer player must accept the challenges the brain delivers. Doing so cools the emotional part of the game. Instead of a sudden rush of negative emotion when something bad happens, an accepting footballer is able to react and respond effectively.

Trust and acceptance are a marriage made in heaven. Trusting your ability and accepting that your ability will be stretched – due to factors that are so often out of your control – helps you keep a rational, calm head.

“I trust and I accept. I trust the journey I am taking and I accept I will be tested. I will encounter problems, some of which will feel unfair. But that’s okay, I accept that and I trust myself and my ability. I trust what I have put in place to become the best I can be.”

Patience

Patience is a mental quality that a soccer player can never have too much of. And it's an attribute that needs work. Just as you lift weights, to get stronger, so you need to be patient to become more patient!

"Relax, calm… be patient. It's okay that 'stuff' has happened. I just have to be patient. I know I'm doing the right things. I can't force success. Success will come to me if I'm patient."

A lack of patience is accompanied by tight muscles. It leads to cortisol (your stress hormone) surging through your body, which prevents high performance. It also slows skill acquisition. You won't be a great learner when you act with impatience.

"Patience, I'll work hard to get back in the team. I can't force my way back in. Just be patient."

Being patient is a forerunner to being relaxed. Relaxation is a necessary ingredient if you want to improve. You'll never break into the team if you're tight and tense. You'll never score 20 plus goals as a striker if you're forcing your goal count. And you'll never keep clean sheets if you're stressing about trying to do so.

- *"Relax, calm… be patient. I'll score goals…"*

- *"Relax, calm… be patient. I'll keep clean sheets…"*

- *"I trust my ability. I accept the challenges and the bad times. I remain patient no matter what happens…"*

Practice

- "I know where I want to get to. I've profiled the next level. I have a new training script. My script is by my bed – I wake up to my future game. It's written on my fridge – my mental nutrition reinforced daily. It's in my kit bag – it's the last thing I look at before I take to the pitch."

- "I commit myself to practice. I build race tracks in my brain – big, thick, speedy, powerful race tracks. Failure is inevitable but I'll continue to reach for Ronaldo and I'll continue to stretch for Smith."

Because this is what winners do – winners envelope patience with practice. When failure strikes hard, they immerse themselves in getting better. Nothing and no-one holds them back.

Through adversity, champions trust their ability. They accept what has happened

to them. They remind themselves that the journey is long and that they have to meet tough times with patience. And then they focus their mind fully on practice.

It’s not because practice makes perfect or practice makes permanent. It’s because practice distracts them from the problems that inevitably arise on their journey to excellence. It’s because practice helps them focus their mind and dissolves the irrelevant stuff into the background. Trust, Accept, Patience, Practice. TAPP mastery.

“I want to get better and better and better. I want to improve my skills, my tactical knowledge, and my mindset. I want to execute my processes on the pitch as best I can.”

Technique Number 22

Never say never, always say yet, and TAPP mastery

Progress Pep Talk

You may *think* of yourself as being capable of performing at a certain level but you may not *feel* that you can. Your soccer image dominates your game, and this is the one true vision you have of yourself as a footballer. It's the vision that can hold you back or propel you.

Your soccer image is best measured by the *feelings* of comfort you experience in your training and playing environment. Measure how good you think you are on a scale of 0-100 as a soccer player and then measure your soccer image on the same scale.

When you feel uncomfortable in your soccer environment it means you are playing above the level of your soccer image. You are out of your comfort zone. These feelings might take the form of nerves, doubts or worries. They need to be managed and then you need to work on the image you have of yourself as a soccer player.

Scale your Soccer Image

*

Champions are tough on themselves in the right way. You may be a little scared to criticise your personal performances in matches but all the best sports competitors do. They just do so in the correct manner.

Firstly, be tough on your process. Did you use your controllers? Did you stick to your script? Did you squash ANTs? If not, why not? Now you've dealt with process, take some time to analyse your performance. Process first, performance second.

Champions are also tough on championship-winning habits. They repeat on a daily basis the actions that lead them towards excellence. They are motivated *and* they are committed. They leave no stone left unturned to be the very best they can be.

It is this toughness that helps them build their skills. It is this toughness that helps them build a winning mentality. And it is this toughness that helps them build their soccer image.

Be Tough on Yourself

*

Just as mind influences body, so body influences mind.

Working on your physicality cleanses the brain, un-fogs the mind, and improves clarity of thought. Improved athleticism opens the door to the kind of mental consistency that a footballer needs.

Do a work-out. A session working on your body trains the mind as well as the torso. You will improve your soccer image and you will believe in yourself more. You give yourself a better opportunity to accomplish more on the pitch.

Strong, powerful and endurance-filled soccer players focus better and are less easily distracted. They run onto the pitch with greater confidence, knowing that their bodily make-up helps them win challenges, reach for headers, pass more accurately, shoot more powerfully, see more and do more.

The message is simple – if you're not working on yourself physically then you're not working to be the very best you can be.

Work on your Physicality and your Athleticism

*

I want players to be able to remember themselves at their very best. I want them to recreate strengths, recall standout games and memorise match winning moments.

By remembering your best, you keep feeding your brain the nourishment it needs to keep learning. And by remembering your best games, you have an active template to perform highly and consistently, time and time again.

Alongside your work on your memory, exercise your imagination daily. Dare to dream of a game that is beyond your capabilities right now. Provide your nervous system with a template of the extraordinary.

By using your memory and imagination every day, you help yourself build a better, stronger soccer image.

Remember to remember and dare to dream

*

There are two paths weaving their way into your footballing future. There is the destructive ‘never’ path and there is the ‘yet’ path. The ‘yet’ path helps you become the very best you can be.

When you start to banish ‘never’ from your soccer speak, and you begin to take the path of ‘yet’, so your soccer image starts to change. It changes from a ‘can’t do’ to a ‘can do’. It changes from destructive pessimism to energising optimism. It changes from a vision of bleak to a vision of peak.

Being into mastery also helps a soccer player manage the tough times he or she may be presented with. I want all footballers to TAPP mastery. I want them to trust their ability, to accept the challenges that arise, to remain patient at all times and to focus on the process of improvement.

Learn, develop, improve…

Never say never, always say yet, and TAPP mastery

Conclusion – Some Feedback

Hi. Come in and take a seat, I've got some exciting things to share with you.

I've been watching you at the club lately and I've seen some changes, some *big* changes.

The way you've been holding yourself. The way you've been interacting with others. It's like you think you have a bottomless pit of potential! You look wide-eyed and alive. You look so free and fearless.

That stare, that look in your eye. You train, you play, and you think like there are no limits to your ability. I love that! It sends a shiver down my spine just thinking about your enthusiasm to learn, to be the very best you can be.

The training script you gave me looks like you've put some effort into analysing your game. I like the way you know what your idea of *better* looks like. And you've formulated a plan to get there – very impressive!

Since you've constructed your script, you've been really focused. I've seen some mistakes, of course that's part of the improvement process, but the way you have been dealing with them has been great to see. I can see you really having to think about the plays in your training script. I can see you thinking, thinking, thinking. I like that. I know that you'll continue to play with improved quality as a consequence. Your brain is changing – it will take time but you will get there.

Keep reaching and keep stretching…

Then there's been those couple of games you've played. I've been impressed. You looked so in control of yourself. It looks like you've been immersed in your match script. The times things didn't go your way, you seemed to get back into position and be completely unaffected. Your body language has been superb. You look bulletproof. You look relentless!

If I was to sum up your game I would use words like confident and energetic. Your new boost of confidence has really shown on the pitch and you've delivered confident performances. You have also looked full of energy, even in the last ten minutes when everyone else has been so tired.

What else? There's definitely more…

You don't know this but I saw you take a couple of minutes of quiet time before the last match started. What were you doing? Were you picturing your script? I

like that idea – I like the fact that you built the perfect process in your mind and visualised it.

And then there was your analysis after the match. I was blown away by the detail you went into. You took away the positives and the areas you wanted to improve.

I'm so impressed.

But I think I'm most impressed with you as a person. You radiate confidence. You look so optimistic. Sure, you don't get it right all the time and there have been a few disappointments, but you've stuck to your tasks positively. Your reactions and responses to setbacks have been superb. You look focused and disciplined. You look passionate. You look like you believe in yourself. You look ready for any challenge that is thrown at you…

…you look Soccer Tough.

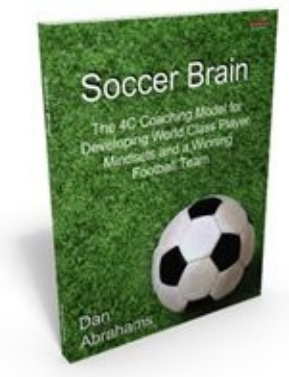
Other Books from Dan Abrahams



Soccer Tough: Simple Football Psychology Techniques to Improve Your Game | Dan Abrahams

“Take a minute to slip into the mind of one of the world’s greatest soccer players and imagine a stadium around you. Picture a performance under the lights and mentally play the perfect game.”

Technique, speed and tactical execution are crucial components of winning soccer, but it is mental toughness that marks out the very best players – the ability to play when pressure is highest, the opposition is strongest, and fear is greatest. Top players and coaches understand the importance of sport psychology in soccer but how do you actually train your mind to become the best player you can be? Soccer Tough demystifies this crucial side of the game and offers practical techniques that will enable soccer players of all abilities to actively develop focus, energy, and confidence. Soccer Tough will help banish the fear, mistakes, and mental limits that holds players back.



Soccer Brain: The 4C Coaching Model for Developing World Class Player Mindsets and a Winning Football Team | Dan Abrahams

The environment that a coach creates, and the relationships formed with players, is the bedrock of performance and achievement. Coaches who are able to deliver students of the game, and who are able to help players execute skills and tactics under pressure are the future leaders of the world's most loved sport. Soccer Brain teaches coaches to train players to compete with confidence, with commitment, with intelligence, and as part of a team. The positive messages from each chapter of Soccer Brain help coaches to develop players through patience, repetition, reinforcement, re-appraisal and high value relationships.

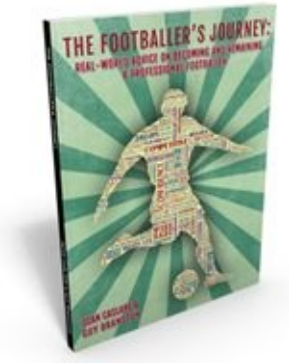
Soccer Brain is for the no limits coach. It's for the coach who is passionate about developing players and building a winning team. This is not a traditional soccer coaching book filled with drills or tactics or playing patterns. This book is about getting the very best from you, the coach, and helping you develop a coaching culture of excellence and world class football mindsets.

Other Books from Bennion Kearny



The Bundesliga Blueprint: How Germany became the Home of Football by Lee Price

In this entertaining, fascinating, and superbly-researched book, sportswriter Lee Price explores German football's 10-year plan. A plan that forced clubs to invest in youth, limit the number of foreign players in teams, build success without debt, and much more. The Bundesliga Blueprint details how German fans part-own and shape their clubs, how football is affordable, and the value of beer and a good sausage on match days. The book includes interviews from Michael Ballack, Jens Nowotny and Christoph Kramer, and the movers-and-shakers behind Germany's leading clubs including Schalke, Dortmund, and Paderborn.



The Footballer's Journey: real-world advice on becoming and remaining a professional footballer by Dean Caslake and Guy Branston

Many youngsters dream of becoming a professional footballer. But football is a highly competitive world where only a handful will succeed. Many aspiring

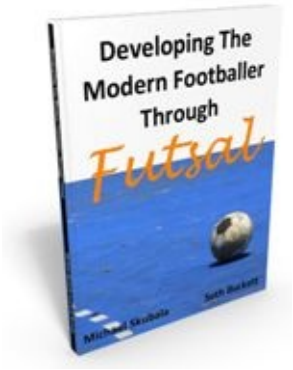
highly competitive world where only a handful will succeed. Many aspiring soccer players don't know exactly what to expect, or what is required, to make the transition from the amateur world to the 'bright lights' in front of thousands of fans. The Footballer's Journey maps out the footballer's path with candid insight and no-nonsense advice. It examines the reality of becoming a footballer including the odds of 'making it', how academies really work, the importance of attitude and mindset, and even the value of having a backup plan if things don't quite work out.



Making The Ball Roll: A Complete Guide to Youth Football for the Aspiring Soccer Coach by Ray Power

Making the Ball Roll is the ultimate complete guide to coaching youth soccer.

This focused and easy-to-understand book details training practices and tactics, and goes on to show you how to help young players achieve peak performance through tactical preparation, communication, psychology, and age-specific considerations. Each chapter covers, in detail, a separate aspect of coaching to give you, the football coach, a broad understanding of youth soccer development. Each topic is brought to life by the stories of real coaches working with real players. Never before has such a comprehensive guide to coaching soccer been found in the one place. If you are a new coach, or just trying to improve your work with players - and looking to invest in your future - this is a must-read book!



Developing the Modern Footballer through Futsal by

Michael Skubala and Seth Burkett

Aimed at coaches of all levels and ages, Developing the Modern Footballer through Futsal is a concise and practical book that provides an easy-to-understand and comprehensive guide to the ways in which futsal can be used as a development tool for football. From defending and attacking to transitional play and goalkeeping, this book provides something for everyone and aims to get you up-and-running fast.

Over 50 detailed sessions are provided, with each one related to specific football scenarios and detailing how performance in these scenarios can be improved through futsal. From gegenpressing to innovative creative play under pressure, this book outlines how futsal can be used to develop a wide range of football-specific skills, giving your players the edge.

We publish a lot of books aimed at coaches, players, and football fans. Learn More about our Books at: www.BennionKearny.com/Soccer