

MENTAL SKILLS NEEDED TO DEVELOP WORLD CLASS RUGBY PLAYERS

Analysts trying to determine the single most important factor that helped England win the Webb Ellis trophy in the 2003 Rugby World Cup, have had to consider all aspects of the game. Was it the squad's superior fitness levels or was it down to their technical abilities? Was it their tactical nuance, or Martin Johnson's leadership qualities? And just how important a contribution was Jonny Wilkinson's passionate attitude to training?

In truth, no one single factor can be isolated, but one that is receiving an increasing amount of credit, both within the RFU as with all other elite sports, is the impact that superior mental conditioning can have on a team's and individual's performance.

Which is especially gratifying for Chris Spice, the RFU's Performance Director, who, as the man tasked with managing the elite game, has seen rugby come from behind in terms of addressing the mental aspect of the game, to being one of its foremost proponents in global sports.

Improved mental conditioning is having a major impact on the sport, not just amongst the players on the pitch, but amongst the staff working at the Twickenham-based rugby headquarters building and in the National and Regional coaching academies located up and down the country too.

In fact, Chris and his fifty-four strong department have adopted a specific mental conditioning methodology so as to help them stay resolutely focused on their ultimate goals: to create an organisational framework and management structure that will allow them to be called a 'World Class Performance Department' - and to increase the likelihood that England can retain the Rugby World Cup in perpetuity!

Success brings with it its own set of problems. One of which, as Chris wryly notes, is that his department "has become inundated with enquiries from other sports as to how we had achieved it. And responding to those enquiries without diverting us from our day-to-day tasks has created its own type of pressure".

Chris's department's continued ability to execute a World Class Performance Plan (WCPP) (formally adopted by the RFU in 2000 and one of the UK's twenty six major sports governing bodies encouraged by the government to put in place a WCPP), whilst under intense – international – scrutiny is due, in part, to their using a mental skills development approach provided by Gazing Performance Ltd, an external training company which has now worked with Chris and the RFU since 2003.

In fact, recruiting an external partner to help provide this was one of the first decisions that Chris made when accepting the RFU's offer to join them (he was previously employed as the Performance Director at England and Great Britain hockey). As he quickly recognised, to be truly effective, his department would not only need to strengthen its 'departmental infrastructure', but would also need to adopt, as Chris puts it: "a common language and a common framework that everyone could understand and build around".

Despite talking to several companies, Chris chose Gazing "largely on the basis of their balance between the practical and the theoretical" and "because the company understood the need for us to be self-sufficient. We needed to be



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equipped with something we could, in the main, deliver ourselves”.

That Chris’s coaches could quickly begin to deliver Gazing’s methodology themselves is based entirely on its highly pragmatic approach. The company makes extensive use of ‘maps’: one page diagrams that let users ‘navigate’ their way around a problem to its successful resolution and in such a way that they remain focused on the task in hand, all the while ignoring potential ‘diversions’.

Gazing’s maps have been a hallmark of their work, first with international athletes, and then more recently with blue chip commercial enterprises, such as Xerox. In every case, Gazing’s track record has been impressive; delighted clients who keep coming back.

Martin Fairn, the company CEO and a founding partner who is responsible for managing the relationship with the RFU, describes their approach in this way “the mental strength required to consistently deliver a superior performance whilst under pressure is a skill that can be learnt, like any other technical skill, (as Jonny Wilkinson proved in 2003!). But it needs awareness and practice to deal with potential diversions. Our training provides that awareness and helps build that mental toughness”. In the RFU’s case, Gazing’s maps have been used not just to help develop the players’ mental skills but as part of Chris’s efforts to create a more integrated department. The Performance Department comprises five main sections, including the National Academy (headed up by Brian Ashton); the Regional Academies; the Elite Referees; the Elite Coaching staff and the Elite Support team, comprising the medics, physios, and performance analysts, headed up by Roy Headey.

What, then, have been the benefits of this approach to helping Chris manage his fifty strong department? Chris is adamant that it has helped them to become even more focused on their principal departmental aims and has also helped to create a far more robust approach to problem solving and decision making.

Each of the five departmental sections has produced a specific action plan or ‘pathway’ that together creates a common departmental ‘framework’. (Not surprisingly, it’s called a ‘World Class Performance Map’!)

And not surprisingly, Chris highlights this aspect of Gazing’s service as being of considerable value at an organisational level. He says, “We are a highly motivated departmental team and we intend to become world leaders in what we do. Our use of Gazing’s methodologies helps us to stay focused on the task in hand; to avoid distractions and to prioritise what’s important, and what’s not. It gives us a common language that minimises the risk of miscommunication and misunderstanding”.

Departmental decision making has also benefited. For example, during the lead up to the 2003 World Cup, Chris and his team used the Gazing approach to help them make a number of different predictions and then build plans around them. Predictions, according to Chris, that largely came true. “When you have a plan in place for every contingency, it gives you greater confidence and ultimately, makes you more resilient”, is how he puts it.

“For example, we planned for scenarios such as key players getting injured and the effect this would have on the team’s performance. The result was that, when the injuries occurred, it did not have the negative impact everyone assumed they would have”.

Chris’s use of Gazing’s maps continues and he is now using the methodology as the basis for continuous management development within his own department and to further develop their leadership qualities. This includes regularly running workshops to review progress.



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For Brian Ashton, the RFU's National Academy Manager, who works closely with many of England's existing and future elite players, Gazing's maps have really helped reinforce his views on mental skills. He says, "My coaching always naturally incorporated diversions. Gazing now helps me throw things at the players during training that deliberately disrupts the session. But it also gives them a map that keeps them on-task. The feedback from the players has been fantastic as they can see how it can help them think through a game".

Not only has England's A team been exposed to Gazing's approach, but the more junior sides too. In fact Brian claims that "the U16 to U18 group has responded particularly well to it. For them it has been a fantastic introduction to improving their mental skills. Probably because it is squarely based on logic and commonsense and not on 'sports psychology'".

Roy Headey, Head of Elite Support, believes that "mental strength is best achieved through common understanding. And that is the strength of Gazing". To him, it has three other plus points, "Its simplicity is a huge advantage and the association with colour helps players memorise the maps more clearly. But it's fun too which makes it highly enjoyable for the players".

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Roy's attitude to developing superior mental strength amongst the players highlights how far the RFU has moved in recent times to incorporate mental skills development alongside the more traditional physical, technical and tactical skills now required by a modern elite rugby athlete.

And he also highlights how important a contribution Gazing is making to the RFU's efforts in this area. He says "Gazing fits into the 'England Way'. It's a powerful psychological framework. And anything else we do in the mental skills area should be directly linked to it".



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