

DEVELOPING MENTAL TOUGHNESS THROUGH SELF KNOWLEDGE

By Alistair Smith



We are constantly being told that to become an elite performer requires practising for three hours a day for at least ten years.

Acquiring this 'mastery' means accumulating a minimum of 10,000 hours, a figure which academics allege, applies in any discipline. (1) It would, for example, take this time to become a concert level pianist, a professional tennis player or a mathematician capable of solving Fermat's Theorem. However, ten years being forced to do piano scales would not turn a prodigy into a performer capable of 'wowing' audiences. What academics have been less confident about describing is what exactly should be done in those 10,000 hours and to what extent the time spent should be performer or coach driven.

Recent research on outstanding performers and self theory points to what should be done to achieve 'mastery' and shows the flaw in the view that elite performance is largely about giftedness and reinforcing 'what talent is already there'. It points towards the importance of a form of mental toughness which becomes evident from an early age. One of the things we know is that mental toughness can, to some extent, be developed.

Carol S Dweck argues that from childhood, 'entity theorists' build in the limits to their own achievement. (2) Entity theorists invest in the view that their natural gifts are largely inherited and are what will see them through. They tend to attract ego-related praise which focusses on their successes and they appear to achieve superiority with minimal effort. They prefer to spend time showing off their skills rather than struggling with new ones. Often, they are precocious early in life. Incremental theorists, on the other hand, have a view of themselves that they may not be as good as their peers but with some extra effort they can get there. They tend to attract more task related praise which focusses on their efforts. As they learn to manage frustration, they develop a wider range of coping strategies. They practice more at what they need to improve upon. They are more likely to be on the margins early in life.

A key finding is that when faced with genuine frustration and complexity, entity theorists tend to crumble - blaming themselves as they do so - incremental theorists tolerate frustration and persist. Persistence is the number one intelligent behaviour.

In other disciplines such as business and education, management have long since grasped the idea that feedback needs to be two-way with the 'performer' actively involved in the process, with a shared language so that both parties can talk sensibly about improvement and the dialogue being as objective as possible (3). Within professional football there is an excess of ego and performance related feedback most of which goes in one direction - from coaching staff to players. The nature of such feedback is that it is largely informal, usually ad hoc and can be of limited objectivity.

Professional footballers are, by definition, mentally tough. They wouldn't be there otherwise. They are used to competing. However, what stops a good player being a great player can be a lacking in some aspects of mental toughness. Elite performers have more of the components of mental toughness in place than others - although this doesn't mean they can describe them. Poorer players are more likely to exhibit performance related anxiety (4). This comes through when you match skills being demonstrated in the safe environment of the training pitch with an inability to do some of the same things in front of a match day crowd a day later (5).

In football I have been surprised at the extent to which the importance of a players' character is talked over and talked up by coaching staff - with many judgments about their readiness and willingness to perform being made based on intuition, gut feeling and subjectivity. As so much of what goes towards making an elite performer is their 'theory of self', in other words, how they themselves make sense of their struggle towards achievement, I considered it to be worth trying to break it down. In an attempt to move towards a more informed, systematic and actively engaging model for looking at the mental side of player development,

I devised a basic tool for staff and players to use, a summary of which is given below.

The Mental Toughness profile components

1. Recovery from setbacks
2. Confidence
3. Competitive drive
4. Concentration
5. Responsiveness and capacity to learn.

For my own use I defined each component in more detail. When working with players I gave much simpler descriptors but my own breakdown looked like this.

The Mental Toughness profile

1. Recovery from setbacks includes the ability to:

- restore stability quickly
- place mistakes in context
- remain engaged with the challenge

2. Confidence includes the ability to:

- manage emotional state
- remain positive throughout
- take competitive risks

3. Competitive drive includes the ability to:

- Focus on a winning outcome
- dominate an opponent
- stay involved

4. Concentration includes the ability to:

- avoid distractions
- sustain attention throughout
- take responsibility for personal performance

5. Responsiveness and capacity to learn includes the ability to:

- change behaviours as needed
- remember and apply key information
- decide when behavioural changes are required

When working with players, for each of the above components I asked for a best and worst scenario and asked the players to score themselves on a summary sheet for each. I tried not to provide suggestions, as this directs thinking, but found this difficult. Without

providing examples, players can often misread or misinterpret the components and end up with too many different interpretations. As the purpose is developmental - to provoke meaningful discussion between players and players and staff – it's best for this stage to be guided.

With something practical to talk about we can begin to introduce coping strategies. Its worth pointing out that not all players completed the process with enthusiasm! A few exaggerated their scores and one didn't finish: a familiar situation for coaches who work with mixed motivation and mixed ability squads across the country!

A KEY FINDING IS THAT WHEN FACED WITH GENUINE FRUSTRATION AND COMPLEXITY, ENTITY THEORIES TEND TO CRUMBLE - BLAMING THEMSELVES AS THEY DO SO - INCREMENTAL THEORISTS TOLERATE FRUSTRATION AND PERSIST. PERSISTANCE IS THE NUMBER ONE INTELLIGENT BEHAVIOUR

For example under 1.Recovering from setbacks I would ask, 'think of a situation when you have dealt well with a setback and score yourself and, then, a situation when you have not dealt well with a setback and score yourself'.

A player might think about coping with being left out of the team or giving away a penalty or committing an error which led to a goal. We would talk about the nature of the setback, how it influenced their thinking and so affected their performance and what they then did as a consequence. We would ask them to look at the difference between best and worse and ask 'what made the difference?' If you can make it safe to do so, players enjoy examining their repertoire of mental strategies. What this inventory provides is a shared vocabulary to describe what's happening.

Another useful tool is to ask comparative questions. For example, 'who is best in the squad at this?' and, 'what do they do which makes them different?'

When we asked a specific question, 'who in the squad exhibits the most confidence?' we found a very clear consensus about the individual who, in a match situation was very confident on the ball. However, surprisingly, it did not match at all with the judgments of the staff! This was great for pushing all the staff to be more evidence based and precise.

When staff constantly talk about the attitude and character of their players. In the back of their head each has a mental template of the 'ideal'. This derives largely from years and years of being involved in football and so can go unquestioned. It's a bit like a teacher giving a score for a pupil's 'attitude' without ever explaining what lies behind the score. What I tried to do was create a language and a set of agreed definitions which would make such conversations more meaningful.

On a separate summary profile I asked the staff – manager, coaches, physiotherapist, analyst and chief scout – to provide their scores for each player. We then sat down, compared our scores and talked about any differences. Then we looked at the scores the players had given themselves and talked through differences between theirs and ours. Once you begin to amass some data, its possible to begin to ask the question 'what can we do to improve each component for each player and across the team?'

The components of this inventory can provide an 'architecture' for pre-season planning, a quick assessment of mental state or a tool for getting players to talk about the 'hidden' side of performance. It can provide an opportunity to promote positive development across the five areas. It can be used for individual and team target setting, incentives and bonuses, match preparation, team talks, video analysis and de-briefing, the behaviours which are reinforced on the training ground and finally, what is said to individual players across the season.

10,000 hours is a lot of lifetime to devote to anything. The more we can help a performer better understand what he or she brings to that time and how to 'tweak it for the better', the more we can accelerate their progress.

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