



PSYCHOLOGY AND COACH EDUCATION

Psychology and Coach Education

The importance of sports psychology is playing an ever-increasing role in influencing and maximising peak performance for the professional player. The line between success and failure is very thin and players who are mentally strong and have the will to win stand a greater chance of tasting success, than those only relying on their physical and technical ability. The influential role, chiefly by managers and coaching staff, is essential in preparation of the player and the creation of a positive state of mind for both player and team. Furthermore there can be “key influencers” within the team group, as well as experienced players and a captain, and it’s important that they all realise the influence and impact they may have on their peers – whether positive or negative.

Introduction

In 2004 artificial turf surfaces were introduced into the Laws of the Game. This meant that, over a period of time, more professional players would experience the new generation of artificial turf surfaces – namely the FIFA RECOMMENDED 1 STAR and 2 STAR surfaces.

An alternative not a substitute

FIFA has always maintained that “Football Turf” should be an alternative and not a substitute for top quality natural grass. However, top quality natural grass in the global environment is not always possible. This can be the case for various reasons:

- Lack of sufficient finances to maintain a grass pitch in adverse climatic conditions.
- Modern, spectator-friendly stadia design, which creates a micro-climate and makes it difficult to grow good quality natural grass.

- Club development and increased use that has an impact on the durability of the surface.

The aims of the FIFA Quality Concept for Football Turf

The objectives are to

- create globally recognised standards
- ensure global consistency
- superior surface quality
- ensured safety of players
- install Football Turf in locations where useful

The problem – Managing change

Many of the “key influencers” to players had experienced a different generation of artificial turf surfaces – the so-called plastic pitches. This was mainly in England during the 1980s – and very much a negative experience. However if these “negative experiences” are communicated to players preparing to play on Football Turf, in turn this will mean that the players would not be in the correct mental state, as a negative vibe has been created. Those who play football accept that defeat often stems from the inability to manage anxiety, fear, anger or despair. With the FIFA RECOMMENDED Football Turf surfaces being more widespread and challenging, the former use and scepticism regarding artificial turf and the issues of anxiety, fear, anger and despair may become more prevalent. Having a strong and committed coaching philosophy that supports the use and benefits of FIFA RECOMMENDED Football Turf playing surfaces will help alleviate the potential fears and anxiety of professional players.



Nigel Fletcher

Nigel Fletcher led the psychology discussion concerning the management of technological change.

He would like to thank the following for their input:

- Prof Len Nokes (Cardiff University)
- Dr. Eric Harrison (Independent Consultant)
- Bill Beswick (England Team Psychologist)
- Barry McNeill, Ged Holmes, Blake Wooster (Pro Zone)
- Gernot Zirngast (FIFPro)
- Tony Strudwick (First Team Fitness Coach – Manchester United)
- Lars Bretscher (FIFA)

Coach education – Be positive rather than negative!

If the team who is used to playing on natural turf has to play away on a FIFA RECOMMENDED Football Turf surface, it is important that the coach/manager and the other influencers are positive rather than negative. Being positive ensures the players are prepared and provides a better chance of winning! Malcolm Gladwell, the author of “Tipping Point”, stresses how much people are affected by their immediate environment and illustrates how positive thoughts can make a big difference.





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Bill Beswick

Bill Beswick, team psychologist to England's National team, and previously involved with Premier League Football in England with Derby County, Manchester United and Middlesbrough says: "A sports psychologist can spend an awful lot of time listening to complaints, I would rather get my retaliation first".

QUESTION: How can a coach or manager inform players about the FIFA RECOMMENDED Football Turf surfaces in an objective way, in order to create a positive mental state and team atmosphere?

ANSWER: INFORMATION

- This can be the latest medical information,
- but also objective technical information and a performance analysis with the comparison between natural grass and Football Turf at professional levels – and
- Player and Coach Experience

For the sake of every coach, manager or player, they must embrace technological innovation and look at the positive change that has taken place. Additionally, it is the duty of the coach/manager to pass on such information to his players. A useful source of information is FIFA'S

website where all the latest research is published on www.FIFA.com or email football.turf@fifa.org

Changing coach and player perceptions

Only through the managerial and playing experience will the barriers of the plastic pitch era of the 1980s be broken down and be part of the past. For the successful process of change, it has to occur naturally and not be forced upon individuals.

The Blackburn Rovers FC "Football Turf" experience

Blackburn Rovers are in the English Premier League. There are no FIFA RECOMMENDED Football Turf surfaces in the professional game in England. However, during the 2006/2007 UEFA Cup, Blackburn were drawn to play Red Bull Salzburg. This meant that by playing away from home, Blackburn had to play on the FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR Football Turf surface.

The before and after experience – From negative to acceptable

Coaches viewpoint

Before

"It isn't something that you come up against anymore. Ten or fifteen years ago – when they were first introduced – there were a number of pitches you would have to prepare for now and again. And the one thing I do know is that the Red Bull Salzburg have a plastic pitch, so we'd have to prepare for that. But thankfully we have a facility here that will probably match what they have to offer, so we'll make use of it." (Mark Hughes)

After

"A lot was made of the artificial pitch before the game, but Hughes felt that Tugay loved the surface." (Lancashire Telegraph)

"I think we coped with the surface very very well, certainly Tugay thoroughly enjoyed the surface and at times the Salzburg players couldn't get near him." (Mark Hughes)

"The pitch wasn't an issue for us." (Mark Hughes)

Players viewpoint

Before

Also the players had a perception of what they would face, as mentioned by fitness coach Tony Strudwick.

- 1) Biggest threat to preparation was historical prejudice
- 2) Mismatch between turf experience at training ground and the experience at Red Bull Salzburg. Red Bull Salzburg had the FIFA RECOMMENDED 2 STAR Surface, Blackburn Rovers training ground did not.
- 3) Tempo of passing difficult to replicate
- 4) Unknown parameters lead to anxiety
- 5) Player selection more akin to technical competences

Tony Strudwick, first team fitness coach at the time, and now in a similar role at Manchester United, was a key individual in the successful attempt to control and manage the process in order to generate a positive image for the players.





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This included:

- Eccentric Training to increase deceleration capabilities. This included cutting and turning drills and high intensity pressing drills.
- Footwear education
- Tempo control. For example the grass cut short on 1st team training pitch to ensure speed of the first pass. Use of indoor artificial turf. However, in hindsight, this was contradictory as the surfaces were different.
- Changing player perceptions. Reinforcing positive mental images. Training at the Red Bull Salzburg prior to the match reinforced positive anchors.
- Attention to detail during player selection. This included tactical and player considerations.

After

With Tony Strudwick optimally preparing the players and creating positive images and experiences before the game, this certainly helped the team. The post match feedback was positive from the coaching and playing staff and it was an enjoyable spectacle. The technical (pro zone research for FIFA) and physical analysis from Tony Strudwick's experience was also positive and acceptable.

Conclusion

Psychology and coach education has a significant role to play in facilitating and supporting the implementation of new technology such as "Football Turf" and in opposing inaccurate perceptions. As key influencers in the game, managers, coaches and some players are instrumental in communicating the potential impact of "Football Turf". The experience by Blackburn Rovers on Football Turf clearly illustrates how the influence of the manager and coaching staff can affect

the overall perception of "Football Turf" and prevent any unfounded negativity. Even though most prefer "top quality natural grass", it is important to be open to Football Turf.

With the appropriate preparation, research and coach education "Football Turf" could become an accepted playing surface in professional football and represent a positive step forward for the game to be played consistently at the highest level throughout the world.

