

Mental Skills Training for Soccer: Traits of High Achieving Players

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Soccer players that excel at higher levels have an organized system for fitness, practice and play and share a common set of emotional competencies and personality traits. Elite players that consistently achieve peak performance despite changing competitive circumstances display quality preparation, competitive follow-through, and accurate self-evaluation. Stated more simply they are ready to compete, get the job done, and react to results. This article will examine five emotional competencies and nine personality traits associated with high achievement in soccer and other sports.

Emotional competencies are natural or learned skills that enhance a soccer players ability to compete with intensity and consistency and become a good teammate. The most important of these is **emotional control**. This refers to the ability to manage feelings and impulses to act while staying focused on a goal in the face of competing emotions. This competency permits individuals to play through mistakes and injuries and bounce back when they are being outplayed. A second important competency is **self-awareness**. This refers to the ability to maintain perspective between an ideal or unrealistic image of play and an actual image that is based on accurate feedback from others. This prevents the development of unrealistic expectations and ensures that play occurs at the proper competitive level. **Internal motivation** is another important competency. This refers to practice or play that is based on a natural or developed love or passion for the game rather than an attempt to satisfy the expectations of others or for a scholarship, fame or social popularity. This prevents burnout and disappointment with playing time. A fourth competency is **empathy**. This refers to an instinctive ability to be sensitive and supportive to others. This is critical to team unity and purpose. The final competency is **socialization**. This refers to the ability to be an effective

communicator and to bond with others while maintaining an attachment to strong competitive ideals and values. This competency is also necessary for team unity and critical for the development of a distinctive team style of play.

Studies of Olympic champions have identified nine personality traits that are associated with high achievement. These can be remembered using the acronym **BELIEVE IT**. The first of these is **Balances** sports and other life areas. This refers to the ability to shift time and energy from sports to other important areas like family, friends, academics, hobbies and rest. This follows an important principle in athletics of stress and recovery. When you are able to truly “unplug” from soccer, you can go back with renewed energy and enthusiasm. For younger soccer players it also refers to the ability to play and enjoy other sports or to cross train. The second trait is **Encourages** and supports teammates. This is necessary in a team sport like soccer to ensure uniform intensity, work rate, and playing rhythm. The third trait is **Lets** go of mistakes and defeats easily. This is important in a continuous play sport like soccer. If one or more players loose intensity or get distracted after a poor play or allowing a goal, then the entire team’s play can drop. The fourth trait is that the **Image** about self and abilities is positive. This means that despite winning or losing, positive thoughts and feelings are maintained. The fifth trait is **Enjoys** training and competition. This means that despite all the hard work and setbacks that the passion for the game and the satisfaction of steady improvement far outweigh any negatives. The sixth trait is **Visualizes** success and positive play. This refers to maintaining a general view that success will ultimately come from quality preparation as well as to using visualization and positive imagery in practice and in the days before competition. These mental repetitions are easy to do if in a relaxed state and provide a nice addition to the physical repetitions necessary to create the muscle memory of automatic play. The seventh trait

is **Evaluates** performance and outcome. This refers to having a system for reviewing each game to identify the positives of play and areas for improvement to create goals for the next set of practices. The eighth trait is the ability to maintain and regulate **Intensity** during practice and competition. Intensity is often defined as controlled and directed aggression. Intensity must be built slowly during the pre-game warm-up. It requires that each player clear his mind (of clutter and distractions), relax his body, and focus and rapidly shift his attention before raising his aggression. Goals in soccer are usually scored when one team's intensity level is consistent across all players and well above the other team. The final trait involves **Talk** that is positive and encouraging. It is important for teammates (as well as coaches and parents) to catch each other being good or doing something well rather than groaning or shouting when mistakes are made. The best teams push the play to its peak through positive team talk. A positive phrase can lock in an action and ensure that it is executed with skill and precision.

I recommend that all players evaluate themselves each year against these emotional competencies and personality traits. When the evaluation indicates a below average rating then an improvement plan should be developed. For more reading on this topic go to www.mdsports.net and print out a copy of the mental toughness training manual for soccer.

References:

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