

Mental Preparedness as a Means of developing Mental Ability of Youth Soccer Players in Sierra Leone

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Abstract: Competition ability is not acquired in a day and does not end in a day. Getting the ability to compete and knowing what to do require daily practice with the right exercises, setting positive and achievable goal, working towards achieving these goals. It takes place inside the field of place and in their silence moments. This research looks into the competition ability of youth football players focusing on the mental ability of players ranging from ages 13 to 15 years. Related articles were reviewed t. At the end, these age groups are assessed to see what their competition ability is. These groups of are youth players from Sierra Leone, a country were the level of football is not too high. This country is found in the West Coast of Africa with about a little over seven million people. The research looks into how these youth players demonstrated some skills within the mental components. These components are the basic skills level, the preparation level and the performance level. Some of the concepts look into are their emotions, anxiety, the use of imagery, concentration, how motivated were they, and if they rather pursue excellence rather than perfection. The statistical package for Social Sciences was used to analysis the data collect. It was realized that, though these players are knowledgeable on the demands of mental skills, more is required of them to achieve excellence.

Keywords: Competition ability, mental components, mental skills, emotions, anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Performance in soccer (Association Football) is a construct requiring a myriad of skills but is highly dependent upon a subtle blend of players' physical, tactical, technical and socio psychological abilities [1]. At elite levels, the quest for success continuously leads practitioners, researchers and sports scientists to explore different means to evaluate and improve these main areas of performance, both singly and, more impactful, in combination. As one of these indices, match analysis provides a factual record of game events underpinning both individual and team performance in competition.

Moreover, match analysis provides a means of evaluating both the outcome and process of completion ability through quantification of the many characteristics of team play and the demands specific to individual playing positions [2]. It is, in part, the basis for making informed judgments on performance and the provision of feedback, provided that data collection processes employ methods that are accurate, objective and reliable. Information gleaned from analyses of competition is used to guide decision-making as part of the coaching process and can help determine effective

strategies for optimising the metal skills specific to soccer.

Soccer is the world's most popular sport. Identification and development of talents from a young age is becoming increasingly important for national and international federations. Sports specific development academies and general training programs for developing players decision-making process are being establish in some other part of the globe like, United State of America, United Kingdom, China but has not yet started in my country Sierra Leone.

While there is underlying theoretical framework for long term youth development in Sierra Leone, much of the details regarding the influence of the demands of the game remain unclear, therefore assessing competition ability component of the youth soccer player is becoming important for coaches, youth players and researchers like myself.

Soccer is a dynamic and intense multi-dimensional intermittent sport, which requires a very high level of decision-making. It demands specific

qualities or characteristics before the game, during the game and after the game.

One of the major challenges most players have in their youth soccer journey is their ability to read the game and interpret the situation in the game that allow them to figure out solutions. We here critical assessment of the most often as players having their “head down” or “ball watching”, but what does that mean? Players that ball watch or play with their head down are likely so engaged and sometimes nervous about the situation that they don’t have control of the problem or an understanding of how to solve the problem that is presenting itself.

Certainly a major concern for the youth player is the evaluation of information that leads to competition ability about effective actions to take. In this study, I will see how this category of youth players (13-15) react and make decision that will impact their competition ability. It is of the opinion that youth players pick up different aspect of the same game situation and make different decisions.

The Sierra Leone national football team is the national team of the Republic of Sierra Leone was controlled by the Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA), The team is affiliated to the West African Football Union of CAF and they have never qualified for the World Cup.

Football is the most popular sport in Sierra Leone. The governing body is the Sierra Leone Football Association (SLFA). The SLFA was formed in 1960 and has been affiliated with FIFA beginning the same year. There has been and continues to be trouble within the sport in Sierra Leone. In the past, however, the country has achieved a modicum of success in international competition

The Sierra Leone national football team is popularly known as the Leone Stars and represents the country in international football competitions. Though the team has never qualified for the world cups organised by FIFA, they participated in the African Cup of Nation organised in 1994 and 1996. On 3 September 2016, the national team had a chance to qualify for the Africa Cup for the first time in 20 years if they could defeat Ivory Coast, but could only manage a 1-1 draw in an away match.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

In all FIFA organized competition, Sierra Leone is always grouped to take part in all qualifying. The country as it stands cannot boast of more than two professional players in the top leagues in the world. We have participated in our Zone Two tournament several times and only won twice. The country was doing better

up until the star of the civil war when the country was unable to participate in international football competition for eleven (11) years. After the war about thirteen years back, football has not reached where it was again. The level of coaches is so low and it has created a problem for football to grow.

Helping players understand the timing, flow and rhythm of the game is now very difficult because players don’t watch or think about the game very often. From my little interaction with youth players, most of them seem never to understand when to pass and when to dribble until later in life making their competition ability limited. In soccer we split the field into three (thirds) and progress the decision based on the position of the ball.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Sierra Leone has been a country were youth football players have not being tested to know their level of competition ability. As youth soccer is in its development stage in Sierra Leone, many a time youth players make certain mistakes in decision making ranging from tactical to technical. The constant changing nature of the game presents a constant challenge to players.

While processing information from one situation a player can quickly be faced with a new situation as the game evolves. The game is constantly changing and requires information to be processed at the same rate as faster than the situation to ensure correct decisions are made.

This research will bring out these faults and let the youth player realizes that rapid perception is essential for rapid action. The research will make the youth player realizes that to see is one thing but to act accordingly is another and that it is highly desired of all players.

It is also significant because it will make the player realizes that their ability to make good decision is based on his ability to absorb or take in information from the flow of the game, act upon the information in a positive manner technically and tactically and process the information quickly.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

AIM

The aim of the study is to examine or assess the competition ability level of youth football players in Sierra Leone within the age range of 13-15, with specific focus on their mental ability.

The objectives of this research include:

- Relating the mental awareness of the youth player to the level of mental analysis

- Determine the level of understanding of the youth football player of the three levels of mental skills.
- To provide better solutions and recommendations on how the concept of mental ability as it relates to decision-making will be used to develop both the youth player and the game of football in Sierra Leone.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In professional soccer internationally, the foundations for contemporary practice and competition are no longer based solely on simple personal views of how well players perform, or on traditional subjective analytical methods passed from one generation of coach to another.

Over recent years, a more comprehensive approach to coaching through science is providing the applied practitioner and player with greater control, preparation, accountability and, most importantly, measurable progress [3]. Of course, the translation of knowledge and expertise gleaned from data derived from match analysis into a form that is usable and applicable in training and competition is paramount if it is to have a meaningful impact on performance. Yet, it is only in the last decade or so, however, that formal match analysis has gained widespread acceptance among soccer practitioners at professional standards of play [4]. Reflecting this evolution, most professional clubs now formally employ match analysis in one form or other. A greater understanding by contemporary practitioners of the potential benefits of science and analytic processes has aided in bridging the gap between research and practice. In turn, this has led to the development of more evidence-based practice frameworks for optimising completion ability and match preparation.

Within any evidence-based framework for professional sports performance, knowledge of the physical requirements of play is necessary to aid in the design and application of adequate fitness training strategies in preparation for contemporary competition [5]. Indeed, research in male professional soccer has shown that the physical characteristics of players [6] and the fitness demands in official competition have substantially evolved over recent decades [7, 8]. The main purpose of any contemporary strength and conditioning process is thus to equip players with the optimal blend of fitness-related skills to respond to the ever-evolving demands of soccer competition. These demands refer to a wide range of characteristics that are essential in assisting players in competing for possession of the ball, reacting quickly and optimally to continually changing game situations, and maintaining high performance levels throughout the entire duration of games and across the competitive season [9]. Accordingly, a thorough understanding of the youth

player requirements specific to match-play and factors potentially affecting competitive performance can ensure that objective and realistic decisions are taken for structuring the physical conditioning elements of training programmes.

Generally speaking, the framework structure of any physical conditioning regimen should ensure that an appropriate and complementary combination of fitness components is provided to cope with the particular requirements of play. Indeed, the physical development framework in soccer refers to the various elements underpinning the conditioning programme: developing work capacity and endurance, speed, strength, power and recovery [10]. A challenge for conditioners is to provide a systematic approach to integrate, develop, and fine-tune this multitude of physical qualities. Accordingly, a primary step underpinning the conditioning process of these fundamental fitness elements is the monitoring of exercise intensity in competition to objectively quantify the contemporary characteristics of performance and position-specific demands of the sport [11]. Unfortunately, institutional rules and regulations currently forbid both the wearing of any electronic device to record movement and the sampling of physiological responses to exercise in official professional soccer competition. Monitoring physiological responses during exercise must always be socially acceptable, non-invasive and not interfere with performance [12]; factors which are currently unfeasible with contemporary professional soccer rules. Consequently, information on exercise intensity via measures such as heart rate, lactate concentrations, oxygen uptake and body temperature are unavailable at the highest levels of play although recently, promising work has been conducted in an attempt to estimate the energy cost of physical activity using analysis of player movements on video recordings [13]. The evaluation of physical performance in match-play via motion analyses within a professional football club setting and its applicability to fitness testing, training and preparation for elite competition are the reason of the present doctoral thesis. This document presents, discusses and evaluates the content and contribution of a selection of published papers from a larger body of research produced over the course of my work in youth soccer clubs.

Making a reliable evaluation on a collegiate strength and conditioning program will consist of many variables that are measurable and some that are not measured in this study. Programs are evaluated primarily on measurable variables that can be quantified, but to make an accurate yet reliable evaluation of a program, the coach has to consider the intangible portion of a program. The “intangibles” are non-measurable characteristics that a good strength and conditioning program must have in order to be

successful. Examples of the “intangibles” are knowledge of the game, heart, and motivation. The “intangible” characteristics will not all be investigated in this study.

MENTAL DEMANDS OF SOCCER

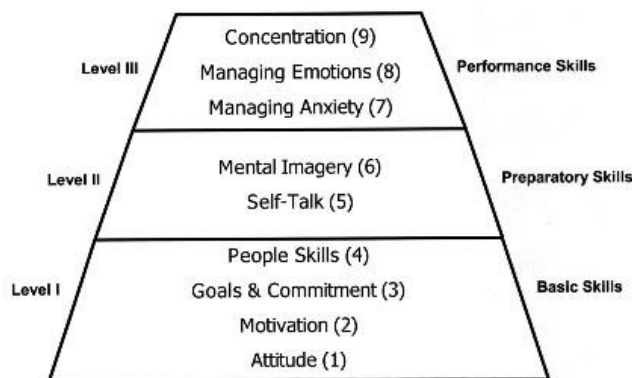
Soccer is just as much a mental game as it is a physical game. Even if players have the best grasp of fundamentals and the best soccer training, it's worth nothing if they crack under pressure, or if they have mental, emotional and lifestyle issues outside of soccer that mess with their head in-game.

Bouncing back from a poor performance or handling negative emotions is something that comes from having your head on right, not just practicing drills up and down the field. If you want to get ahead of the game, you should spend as much time training your mind as you do your body.

By learning to manage stress, anxiety and other psychological aspects of the game, you can excel faster than your peers who just focus on the mechanics of soccer.

MENTAL SKILLS

These nine mental skills are necessary for performing well in sport as well as in non-sport performance situations.



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METHODOLOGY INTRODUCTION

Decision making is an important issue in soccer, which has been investigated deeply enough by other researchers in other parts of the world. This research proposes a probabilistic approach to decision making. The proposed methodologies will be based on the maximization of a game situation score function, which generalizes the concept of accomplishing different game objectives as imagery, emotions attitude, motivation etc. the methodology includes a qualitative

The Performance Pyramid

Although each of the nine skills is important, its primary importance will occur during one of three phases: long-term development, immediate preparation for performance, and during performance itself.

Level I - These mental skills constitute a broad base for attaining long-term goals, learning, and sustaining daily practice. They are needed on a day-by-day basis for long periods of time, often months and years.

Level II - These skills are used immediately before performance to prepare for performance. They may be used just before competition begins, or immediately before a specific performance action, such as a golf shot or a free throw in basketball.

Level III - These skills are used during actual performance behavior. The pyramid below represents the relationship of the nine skills to one another. Each of the higher levels incorporates and is based upon the skills of the preceding levels.

method which was used to assess the mental aspect of competition ability.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Subjects for this research were drawn from all region and districts within my country. These subjects for the research purpose included a total of two hundred (200) participants that were drawn from the ages of 13 to 15 years. Knowing fully on the different components into which the field of play is divided, the selected athletes were drawn from positions of Goal Keeping, Defending, MidFieding and Attacking.

SAMPLES AND SAMPLING METHOD

In this research total samples 200 male young footballers aged 13 to 15 years from four different regions were selected. The players were classified according to their playing positions such as goal keepers, central defenders, fullbacks, midfielders and forwards.

INSTRUMENTS

Appropriate instruments were selected on the basis of their relevance to the research objectives and that has meaningful role to the end result.

To achieve that, the following instruments were used to collect data.

- Questionnaire
- Check list
- observation

FINDINGS AND DISCISSIONS

INTRODUCTION

The third pillar of soccer is the mental concept. This aspect looks into the attitude, emotions, and degree of concentration of the players, setting of realistic goals, responding to issues within and outside the field of play. It also looks into how players use their subconscious mind to read a match. Soccer is just as much a mental game as it is a physical game. Even if players have the best take hold of essentials and the best soccer training, it's value nothing if they crack under pressure, or if they have mental, emotional and lifestyle issues outside of soccer that mess with their head in-game .Bouncing back from a poor show or handling negative emotions is something that comes from having your head on right, not just practicing drills up and down the field. If you want to get ahead of the game, you should spend as much time training your mind as you do your body.

Table-1: Response by age on attitude, motivation, goal-setting

	MEAN ON THE BASIC SKILLS OF THE PARTICIPANT			Total
	SATISFACTORY	GOOD	EXCELLENT	
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS 13	28	41	3	72
	38.9%	56.9%	4.2%	100.0%
	39.4%	34.2%	33.3%	36.0%
14	21	43	4	68
	30.9%	63.2%	5.9%	100.0%
	29.6%	35.8%	44.4%	34.0%
15	22	36	2	60
	36.7%	60.0%	3.3%	100.0%
	31.0%	30.0%	22.2%	30.0%
Total	71	120	9	200
	35.5%	60.0%	4.5%	100.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Participants were asked of their opinion on the basic skill required for mental preparedness and to test their level of understanding. This component includes their attitude, relation with people, goal setting and motivation. When the arithmetic mean of their responses was calculated, 35% of the

respondents' responses were satisfactory, 60% of the responses we good and 4.5% were excellent. This signifies that 64.5% of the 200 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed to issue relating to their reactions on attitude, motivations, goal-setting and people's skills.

Table-2: Responses by age on self-confidence and imagery

	MEAN ON THE PREPARATORY SKILLS OF THE PARTICIPANT		Total
	GOOD	EXCELLENT	
AGE OF PARTICIPANTS 13	38	34	72
	52.8%	47.2%	100.0%
	38.0%	34.0%	36.0%
14	34	34	68
	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
	34.0%	34.0%	34.0%
15	28	32	60
	46.7%	53.3%	100.0%
	28.0%	32.0%	30.0%
Total	100	100	200
	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Before any game, soccer players have to get their mind set for any encounter. During this period, players will begin to rate their level of confidence and began to image the game itself. Youth players in Sierra were asked about their thoughts on players' preparedness before an encounter. It was a split

thought as 100 of the respondent agreed that players must have self-confidence and should image the game in preparation for it. This figure summed up to 50% while the remaining 100 responded said they strongly agreed. However, age 13 years seems to have a wider experience on this concept.

Table-3: Responses by age on anxiety, emotions and concentration

	MEAN ON THE PERFORMANCE SKILLS OF THE PARTICIPANT			Total
	SATISFACTORY	GOOD	EXCELLENT	
AGE 13	4	30	38	72
	5.6%	41.7%	52.8%	100.0%
	25.0%	30.6%	44.2%	36.0%
14	8	36	24	68
	11.8%	52.9%	35.3%	100.0%
	50.0%	36.7%	27.9%	34.0%
15	4	32	24	60
	6.7%	53.3%	40.0%	100.0%
	25.0%	32.7%	27.9%	30.0%
Total	16	98	86	200
	8.0%	49.0%	43.0%	100.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The first two levels are before the start of game. There are times when what the mind thinks before the start of a match is different from what happens during the game of play. To see if players are aufait with these principles, their responses were

as follows: in a scale point of 1= unsatisfactory, 2= satisfactory, 3=good, and 4= excellent, 16(8%) of the respondents knowledge on the performance skills were satisfactory while 98(49%) was good and 86(43%) was excellent. This signifies that these

athletes are aware that they should control their emotion, maintain their anxiety to stability and

concentrate despite distractions from outside or within themselves.

Table-4: Responses by positions on basic skills (attitude, goal settings, motivation and people’s skills)

	MEAN ON THE BASIC SKILLS OF THE PARTICIPANT			
	SATISFACTORY	GOOD	EXCELLENT	TOTAL
GOAL KEEPER	19	31	1	51
	37.3%	60.8%	2.0%	100.0%
	26.8%	25.8%	11.1%	25.5%
DEFENDER	18	28	0	46
	39.1%	60.9%	0.0%	100.0%
	25.4%	23.3%	0.0%	23.0%
MIDFIELDER	17	32	7	56
	30.4%	57.1%	12.5%	100.0%
	23.9%	26.7%	77.8%	28.0%
ATTACKER	17	29	1	47
	36.2%	61.7%	2.1%	100.0%
	23.9%	24.2%	11.1%	23.5%
Total	71	120	9	200
	35.5%	60.0%	4.5%	100.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Age does not always define knowledge in the game of football. It was on this basis that I decided to rate their knowledge based on their positions of play in the pitch. Referencing their knowledge on the basic skills, the midfielders and attackers responses made up 47.8% of the satisfactory column while that of the defenders and

goalkeepers account for 52.2%. In the good category, the mental knowledge of the midfielder accounts for 26.7% and 77.8% in the excellent categories. However, despite their field of play, 64.5% of the players’ responses were either agreed or strongly agreed.

Table-5: Responses by positions on preparatory skills self-confidence and imagery

	MEAN ON THE PREPARATORY SKILLS OF THE PARTICIPANT		Total
	GOOD	EXCELLENT	
POSITION OF PLAYERS IN THE FIELD OF PLAY	26	25	51
	51.0%	49.0%	100.0%
	26.0%	25.0%	25.5%
DEFENDER	20	26	46
	43.5%	56.5%	100.0%
	20.0%	26.0%	23.0%
MIDFIELDER	26	30	56
	46.4%	53.6%	100.0%
	26.0%	30.0%	28.0%
ATTACKER	28	19	47
	59.6%	40.4%	100.0%
	28.0%	19.0%	23.5%
Total	100	100	200
	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Self- confidence and imagery is also vital no matter the position you play in the field. Coaches believe watching previous matches will help player build their self-confident and imagine how they will react during a match situation. This component however was included in the survey. Athletes were asked if the realize that they should have self-confidence and also imaging a game situation or

skills when they are alone. . Though the responses were 50% each of the good and excellent categories, the attackers’ responses were 28% followed by 26% for the goalkeepers and midfielders. In the excellent column, the midfielders responses were excellent and account for 30% of the total 100%, while 25% were the defenders, 25% were the goalkeepers and 19% the attackers.

Table-6: Responses by positions on performance skills. (anxiety, emotions and concentration)

	MEAN ON THE PERFORMANCE SKILLS OF THE PARTICIPANT			
	SATISFACTORY	GOOD	EXCELLENT	TOTAL
GOAL KEEPER	2	22	27	51
	3.9%	43.1%	52.9%	100.0%
	12.5%	22.4%	31.4%	25.5%
DEFENDER	6	24	16	46
	13.0%	52.2%	34.8%	100.0%
	37.5%	24.5%	18.6%	23.0%
MIDFIELDER	4	28	24	56
	7.1%	50.0%	42.9%	100.0%
	25.0%	28.6%	27.9%	28.0%
ATTACKER	4	24	19	47
	8.5%	51.1%	40.4%	100.0%
	25.0%	24.5%	22.1%	23.5%
Total	16	98	86	200
	8.0%	49.0%	43.0%	100.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The moment of play is also the time for athletes to demonstrate their control over anxiety, emotions and to maintain concentration. After their responses to the various knowledge seeking questions on the performance skills, 16 respondents totaling 8% responses were satisfactory. 98 respondents which represent 49% responses were measured as good, signifying their level of knowledge on controlling their emotions, anxiety and concentrating on the game regardless of what is happening around them. The remaining 86 respondents, measuring 43% had their responses categorised as excellent.

CONCLUSSION

Soccer is just as much a mental game as it is a physical game. Even if players have the best grasp of fundamentals and the best soccer training, it's worth nothing if they crack under pressure, or if they have mental, emotional and lifestyle issues outside of soccer that mess with their head in-game.

BASIC SKILLS

These youth football players are knowledgeable that bouncing back from a poor

performance or handling negative emotions is something that comes from having your head on right. They believed that if one wants to go ahead of the game he has to spend more time training the mind as he does with the body. From their responses, it could be seen that they believe in learning on how to manage stress, anxiety and other psychological aspects of the game, which has the potential of making them excel in the game. Players therefore have to demonstrate a high sense of basic skills. The basic skills are the stepping stone to achieving high mental performance. This group of youths demonstrated a low level of basic skills as their excellent rate was on 4.5%. Though their good rate was 60% and it is acceptable for their level of performance, it is therefore incumbent upon their coaches to increase their level of understanding on the basic mental skills of attitude, goal-setting and motivation. The goals shouldn't be impossible, but they should definitely challenge them and force them to step up their game. Challenging yourself is the only way to consistently improve.

PREPARATORY SKILLS

Players do kick the ball everyday but imaging you doing it even when you are not in the field demonstrates the use of imagery. There are two ways you can do it: external visualization, where you imagine watching a movie of yourself playing soccer, or internal visualization, where you imagine playing as though you are actually doing it. This concept will help familiarize you with your task until you could do it half-asleep, with both hands tied behind your back.

Everybody gets nervous before a game or a performance. Unfortunately, anxiety can also muddle your thinking, which can cause you to make bad judgments on the field. If you're alert, but relaxed and have confident, you can make decisions better and faster when you're under pressure.

This concept was well understood by these youth players. Their knowledge on the preparatory skills proves phenomenal as it was an equal rating of 50% for the good and excellent categories.

PERFORMANCE STAGE

Controlling your anxiety will go a long way to making you feel more confident in your game, because you'll know that it won't affect your performance. These youth believe that they should take some time to relax before each game. This will sure help them from some stress.

We've seen several players come to us with great technical skill but an overdose of adrenaline. Their technique was great in practice, but they would get worked up and make mistakes when the pressure was on. Indecision and hesitation led to missed shots and botched plays. These youth players believe that over the course of their training, they should learn to relax and focus before the game and during their breaks to help offset their usual tension level. They were still able to harness that energy, but they also reacted coolly under pressure, putting that great technique to use on the field. This is shown by their responses to the performance stage. 49% of their responses were good and 43% excellent.

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