

# Getting Players "Match-Ready"

By Dr. Mark Boyea

How many times have you heard an athlete or coach say something like, "We need to be ready to play today," or "I just wasn't ready to play today." Without question, the issue of being ready to play or what we call "match-ready," is always a major concern for players and coaches alike. Let's take a look at what it means to be match-ready, then identify strategies which athletes can use to help themselves become mentally prepared to play. Then we will take a look at some ways in which coaches can help their players become match-ready.

**The Three A's** - Being match-ready can be thought of as achieving total concentration of body, mind and emotion. At this point, athletes must be able to keep all of their attention on skills and strategies they must execute in order to produce top level performance. There must be no distractions, no mental wandering. Being match-ready then is about producing the first of what we will call the three A's - maximum attention.

In order to achieve the level of attention necessary to play well, we must account for the other two A's. These are anxiety and arousal. Anxiety can be thought of in every day terms as nervousness. This nervousness can come from things we are aware of, such as the strength of an opponent, or it can have its source in things we can't put our finger on. Regardless, anxiety is very real and can result in physical discomfort, tension and the inability to keep our thoughts from racing. As you can imagine, these things would make maximum attention difficult to achieve.

Arousal can be understood in practical terms as the extent to which an athlete is psyched up, fired up or energetic. While it's certainly important for players and teams to have the energy to perform, what exactly is the relationship between how psyched up an athlete is and how well he or she performs? The short answer is that arousal helps performance to a point and then it starts to hurt it.

In general, a moderate level of arousal is best for top performance. However, there is one important factor that must be considered in order to make an accurate assessment of the arousal level an athlete needs in order to be match-ready.

What type of sports are we talking about? Sports or positions that consist of high levels of physical exertion over short periods of time (weightlifting, sprinting) require the greatest level of arousal. Ones that consist of lower levels of exertion over long periods of time (golf, baseball) require the lowest degree of arousal. Sports are best performed at a moderate level of arousal.

Therefore, players and coaches are probably wise to avoid being "sky-high" for matches. These are the signs of this kind of over-arousal in athletes: hyperactivity, decreased reaction time, inability to concentrate and when well-learned skills fail.

What then can players and coaches do to account for arousal and anxiety levels which influence attention? Here are a few techniques and suggestions:

## **Develop a pre-match routine**

Establish a pre-match schedule and maintain it. Get the same amount of sleep the night before a game, get up at the same time, put your uniform on or coaching gear in the same way, listen to music, go off by yourself for a few minutes, etc. Experiment until you find a routine. The important point is that you find a routine that meets your needs. The content of your routine is less important than that it be comfortable and consistent. Routines are helpful because they help coaches and athletes control their environment to some extent. Distracting thoughts or emotions have a tougher time doing their damage if everyone involved knows they have a schedule to meet as part of a plan to maximize both individual and collective performance.

## **Make a "mental movie"**

Players need to go off alone someplace an hour or so before the start of a match. There they can close their eyes and try to create a mental movie of themselves performing in the match. They should envision the weather conditions, the spectators and the opponent. Also visualize executing runs, passes, tackles and shots to perfection. They should hear the sounds associated with each of these movements, and forecast themselves communicating the right things at the right times to teammates. They should "feel" what it's like to play to their highest standard of performance. Mental movies help athletes force their attention onto playing the match, and also tend to bring arousal levels up or down as needed.

## **Clear your head**

As discussed earlier, anxiety (nervousness) often results in our being bombarded by a great many thoughts that move rapidly through our minds. Unfortunately, the large majority of these thoughts have nothing to do with performing necessary

skills. Therefore, before athletes can begin to pay attention to only the skills and strategies they have to perform, it may be necessary to have them clear their heads completely. Have them sit or lie down somewhere quiet and simply practice breathing slowly and deeply, in and out. Concentrate on nothing but breathing in and out. What you will find is that in a short time their thoughts will have either greatly slowed down or totally disappeared. When they have reached this point their anxiety will also have mostly or completely disappeared.

### **Use videotape**

Have the team view a videotape of them playing their best. This will again help everyone put all their thoughts and energies on performing necessary skills and strategies. Additionally, videotape can serve as an important reminder that the team can play at a top level. Reinforcing self-confidence is certainly a great way to control anxiety. If you don't have a suitable tape, the next best thing is to use a tape of a team which plays at a consistently high level.

### **Have a backup plan**

One of the risks you run in using a given mental preparation routine is the possibility that circumstances may prevent you from executing it. What happens when you, as coach, feel the need to call an unscheduled meeting when the routine calls for viewing a mental movie? What happens if the tape breaks down? The key is to develop as many match-ready tools as you can so that you can always have something to fall back on. For the athletes it means clearing their mind during that meeting (this will also help them concentrate better on what the coach has to say). Make a mental movie if the real thing becomes impossible.

### **Take a consistent, planned approach to developing match-ready mental skills**

The use of the word skills here is intentional. Mental skills are no different than physical ones in that they can be acquired and improved through regular, organized practice. Have the athletes work on one or more of these techniques daily. Just as you work on physical skills and strategies during practice in order to perfect them for competition, you should also work on mental preparation skills prior to practice in order to perfect them for match use. Remember, use it or lose it!

### **Limit pre-match instructions**

The more you give players to think about prior to competition, the greater risk you run of increasing their anxiety levels. Keep instructions simple and confined to only those small number of things which are essential to performing well against that particular opponent.

### **Consider individual differences**

As you are no doubt aware, every player is different. Encourage your athletes to use those mental preparation techniques that meet their comfort level. A player who has difficulty imagining things will have a tough time making a mental movie. He or she might have better success using head clearing or watching a tape. Highly creative players might find clearing their minds harder than mental movie making. Also of great importance in relation to the issue of individual player differences is that coaches must avoid confusing emotion with being match-ready. This is a common coaching error. Just because a player is psyched, it does not mean that he or she is ready to play. In fact, the opposite is often true. Remember our discussion of arousal levels and performance. The athlete who is hyperactive may very well be over-aroused, while quiet, calm players may be at peak readiness. Emotion and readiness are not the same thing.

### **Don't force it**

Forcing your athletes to try to use mental preparation techniques will probably make them resist doing so, or more likely to use them halfheartedly. Present them as simply another skill area they can incorporate into their training to be a complete soccer player. Discuss the various techniques with your athletes and then help each one discover which ones work best and are most comfortable.

It is unfortunate how many athletes work hard each day in practice at improving their passing, shooting or tackling but when match times comes they can't get that hard work to result in top performance. Usually this is because they have not acquired another critical skill--that of being able to properly prepare themselves for the match. By developing a pre-match routine and set of mental preparation techniques, players can master the three A's: Controlling anxiety, achieving the optimal level of arousal and keeping one's attention focused on executing skills and strategies.