

Case study of a Professional Soccer Player

The player played for a professional soccer club and his country. He was in and out of the team. We looked at improving his mental game. What follows are some of the details of the work that was done.

“I trust my letter finds you fit and well. Find enclosed a report of last week’s session. Please can you complete the following psychological questionnaires and send them back as soon as possible. The results from these questionnaires will be used with the performance profile conducted last week. The work that I will conduct will involve firstly teaching you how to do a number of psychological skills. Second, I will help you implement these skills into training. Third, we will integrate using these skills into competition. Your injury gives us time to conduct the first two stages of the programme. I will phone you up in the next couple of days to discuss the best way forward”.

Session 1

Before the first meeting

Discussions regarding providing support for ANDY were started by the club physiotherapist. The physiotherapist said that ANDY had the potential to be a very good player and a first team regular but his performances were inconsistent: sometimes ANDY would play very well, but at other times he would play poorly. Poor concentration evidenced by poor passes was described as the main reason. I said that I could help ANDY through a programme of assessment, education, and implementation of a psychological skills programme. Psychological skills improve through practice. Thus we should target the areas that ANDY needed to improve, and design a psychological skills programme to improve these areas. The physiotherapist set up the first meeting.

The first meeting

The meeting took place in the treatment room at Club’s training ground. I informed ANDY that the purpose of this session was to first describe how the delivery service would proceed. Second, I outlined that the plan was to construct a performance profile which would form the basis of the support.

The initial part of the session contained ascertaining background information. ANDY informed me that *Professional Soccer Club* took him on when he was 14. He spent seven years at *Professional Soccer Club*, being a regular first team player for three years. He played approximately 150 first team games for *Professional Soccer Club*. He was transferred to his present Club when he was 21. He has spent four years at Club, playing approximately 50 league games.

I asked ANDY to briefly explain the process of selection for each of the first team matches at Club. As ANDY is not a first team regular, it is likely that he does not have a pre-planned preparation routine for each game. Further, ANDY said that he was often called to play

relatively late (Friday night / Saturday morning), and felt his inclusion in the team was because the regular player was injured.

A pre-match routines can be developed so that the athlete is confident that he can get himself into the optimum psychological state before competition. A key to this is the notion that the athlete feels in control. He can exorcise the demons of negative thought when he has to.

How did you feel when you performed your best?

ANDY stated that his best performance in the first team was against Arsenal. He said he felt calm even though this was big game. ANDY said he noticed this feeling because he did not feel the intense unpleasant emotions he expected to feel, and in other important games, has felt before. He described that he that normally he feels emotionally charged or pumped up at the start of the game.

He indicated that the control of this emotional arousal is influenced by his performance in the first 10-15 minutes of the game. A good few first touches have a calming effect, whereas poor first touches tend to lead to performance spiralling downward. This feeling of confidence was considered to be a vital factor in the performance for the rest of the game.

How did you feel when you performed your worst?

Poor performances were described through a number of skill related movements. These included 'not getting tight to the winger', 'bad touches', 'bad decision as indicated by poor passes or making poor runs', and 'poor fitness, often attributed to injuries'.

Performance Profile

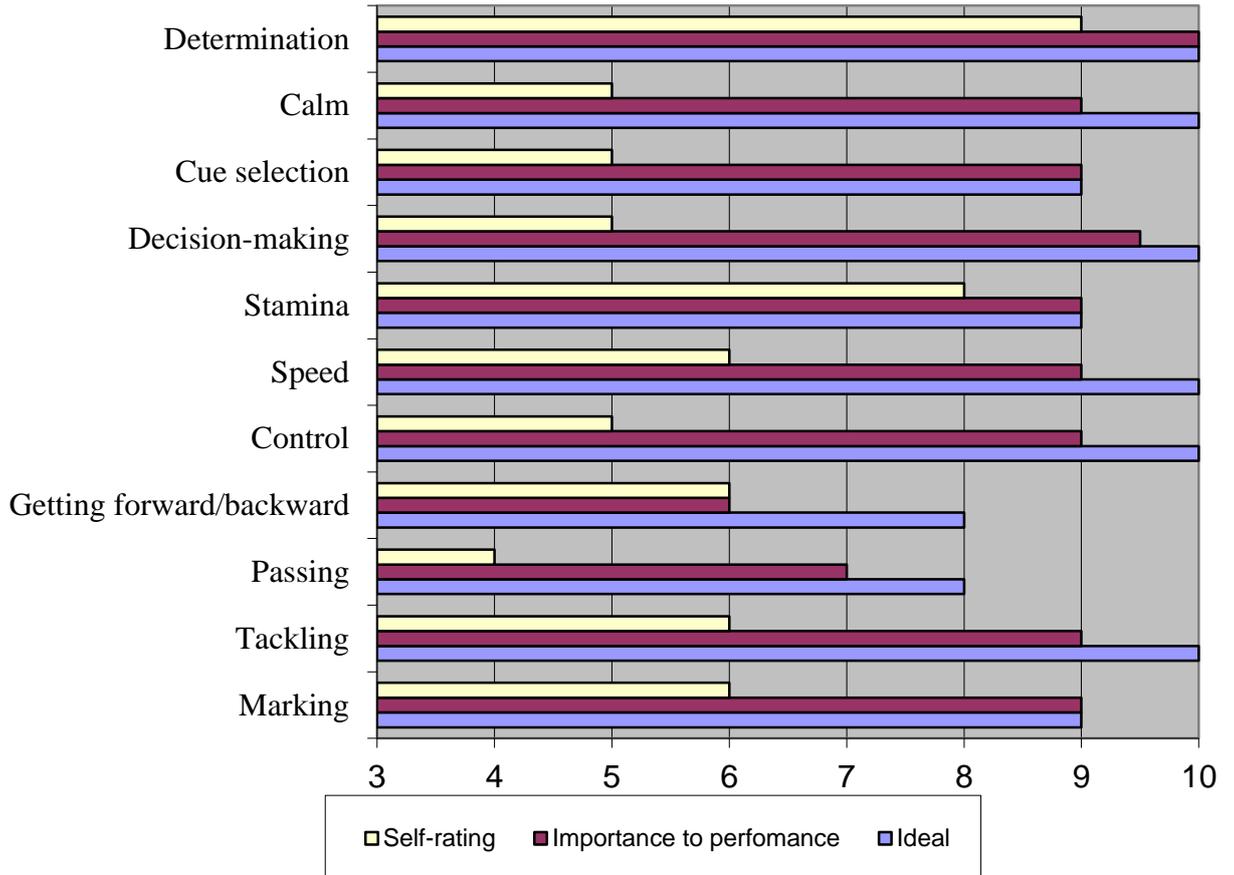
ANDY was asked to identify those factors which she perceived that "the ideal soccer player who played right back" possessed. To assist this I asked him to name the best right back in the world and to list as many qualities that this player had as possible. I asked him to identify the worst right back in the Premier League. The rationale for this is that similar constructs should be identified on both lists but scored differently. ANDY described that the ideal player would play with a high confidence based on previous experience of being successful. The ideal player performs to his reputation. That is, he performs as though he is the best. The ideal player plays with the knowledge that even at his worst, he is still pretty good.

Second, ANDY said that the ideal player would be physically fit. This is evidenced by pace and in particular, pace at the end of the game.

Third, the ideal player would show a high degree of commitment and determination.

Fourth, the ideal player would be a good decision-maker. By contrast, he said that a poor player would show a 'couldn't care less attitude'. As a consequence of this attitude, ANDY indicated that the poor player would perform poorly on the factors that define the ideal player.

Performance Profile ANDY: 13.10.2000



Descriptions of Performance Qualities

1. Marking: This is defined as attending to the player from the opposition. The ability to mark is dependent on the situation. Good marking is both the ability to keep a good distance in relation to the goal.
2. Tackling: The ability to time tackles so that a foul is not committed and ANDY takes the ball of the opposition.
3. Passing: This is the ability to kick the ball accurately to a teammate.
4. Getting forward/backward: This is the ability run up and down the pitch.
5. Control under pressure. This is the ability to control the ball in difficult positions.
6. Speed. This is the ability to support the forwards and support the defenders. To outpace the forwards.
7. Stamina. This is the ability to keep going until the end of the game.
8. Cue selection. This is the ability to identify the relevant parts of performance that bring about success.
9. Decision-making. This is the ability to make the correct decision when faced with the choice of more than one decisions.
10. Calm. This is the ability to feel in control.
11. Determination. This is the ability to maintain effort throughout the game.

The major areas of difference are 'Control under pressure', 'Cue selection', 'Decision-making', the ability to stay 'calm', and 'passing'. It is likely that the ability to stay calm under pressure will influence cue selection and decision-making. We know that increased arousal is associated with poor attentional control. Thus we discussed that a strategy for improvement is to look at coping strategies and relaxation strategies.

Session 2:

The purpose of the second session was to assess and educate Andy with reference to attentional control.

Andy completed the Test of Performance Strategies Inventory.

Attentional control training

The task involved studying a picture. I read out the following instructions. 'To notice the size, colour, and texture of the objects. While staring, mentally list all of the features that you can see. Now select a specific object and stare on it. While looking at the picture, shift your attention to your legs. Feel the weight pressing down. While looking at the picture, notice how your fingers feel. While looking at the picture, imagine yourself performing in an important competition. Decide on the tactics that brought you success. While looking at the picture, notice everything around you in your visual field. Try to be aware of everything at once. Now focus once more and look closely at the object around you in your visual field. Try to be aware of everything at once'.

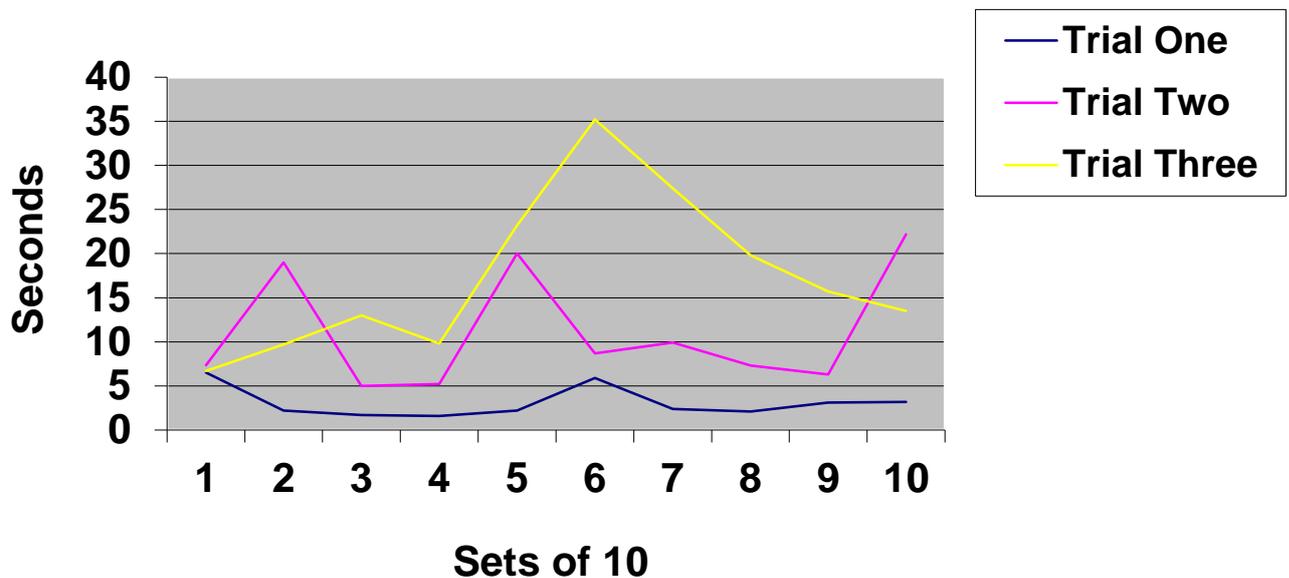
The reason that we did this was to explore the different dimensions of attention. Through conversation, Andy indicated that he could attend to internal narrow, internal broad, external narrow, and external broad dimensions equally well. Sometimes athletes have a preferred style of attention, evidenced by finding it easier to attend to one style than another. Previously, Andy had displayed a tendency to attend to an internal broad attentional style indicated by distracting himself by anticipating negative statements from other teammates or the manager.

We discussed the need to be able to control attention. Errors such as a poorly hit pass could be explained by a failure to attend to right parts of performance at the right time. For example, thinking what your manager or teammates might say at the moment when you are about to strike the ball is an appropriate focus of attention. The attentional style needed to kick a ball in straight line (which is the skill in passing a ball) should involve attending to the ball. We discussed the notion that in football, the player needs to be able to switch attention, and needs to do this quickly. For example, using the above example, the player has to first scan the field to decide where to pass the ball, narrow attention to control the ball, re-scan the field to decide where to pass the ball, re-scan narrowing attention down, and then kicking the ball.

Control of attention is especially difficult when an individual becomes anxious. When an individual is anxious, attention tends to narrow and the individual loses the ability to control what he is concentrating on. Thus, the individual tends to concentrate on a number of irrelevant cues and performance declines.

The method that we used to control attention was through the technique called holding an image. This involves getting an image such as a green ball in your mind and holding that image for as long as possible. Andy holds the watch and stops the clock when the image has vanished.

Holding an Image



We did three sets of 10 trials. The results of these sets of trials are depicted graphically above. As the graph shows clearly, Andy improved his ability to hold an image after each set of ten trials.

We built relaxation training into holding an image. Centering was used as the method of relaxation. Centering involves attending your breathing, noticing your chest inhale and exhale, rise and fall. Then, you attend to a point behind your stomach, whilst breathing rhythmically. Centering is proposed to be effective as you attend to physiological symptoms that are natural. Breathing is a natural response and thus the individual does not have to try and breathe, just focus on how he is breathing.

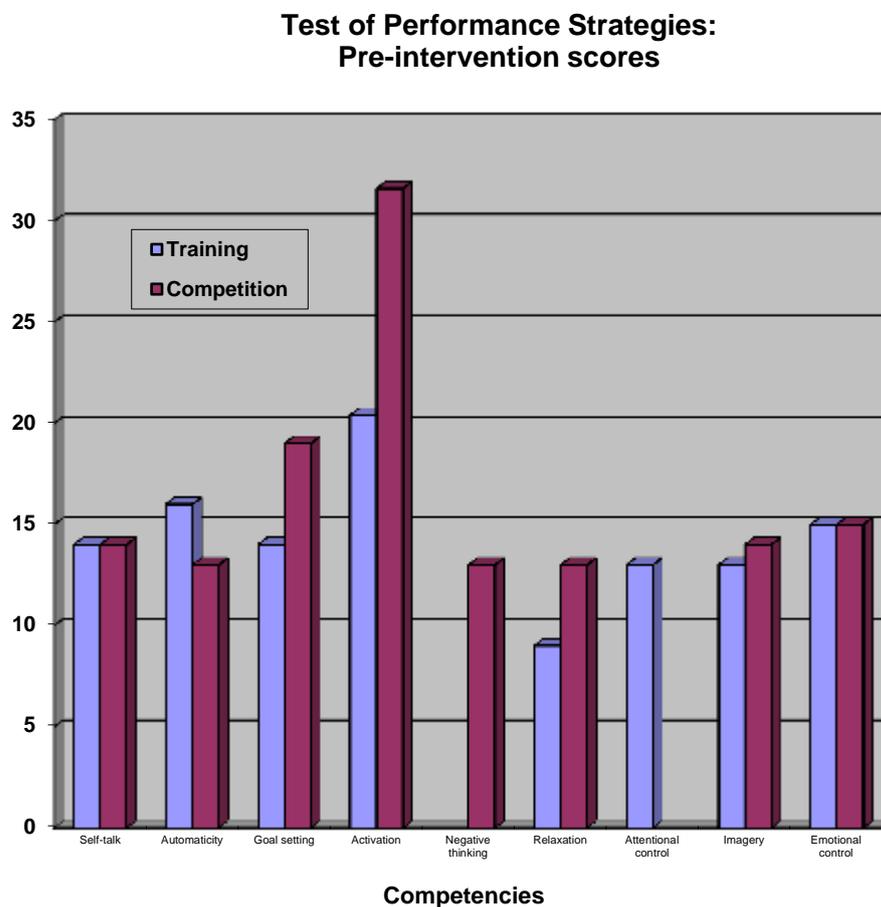
We expanded the techniques of imagery and relaxation training into applied football settings. This was done through looking at the skills identified by Andy in the performance profile of an ideal performance developed previously. We started by looking at the skill of marking. We looked at the key behaviours needed to be a good marker. Andy said these were 'getting the tackles in', 'speed and reaction times', 'mobility' and 'moving when the ball moves'. We set this in the context of playing a match. Andy imagined performing successfully in a training session. This was repeated in a competitive match. We looked at passing. The key qualities for passing included; 'a broad scan', 'a narrow focus', 'a broad focus', 'a narrow focus to kick the ball'.

The session concluded with Andy being advised to practice the attentional control technique of holding an image until he could do it for one-minute. This means that if he performed the holding an image ten times, each time he could hold the image for one minute. I advised Andy to spend 10 minutes per day on holding an image. Second, I advised Andy to practice imagery to perform certain skills. I suggested that he uses imagery to practice performing skills in high-pressure situations.

Session 3

The purpose of the third session was to develop imagery training and attentional control. A second purpose was to introduce the notion of goal setting. It is important that Andy records training sessions where he played well. A record of this in the form of a training diary can help when Andy questions how well he played or is going to play in a first-team match and is feeling nervous. Looking through how well he has been playing, achieving his goals should recreate feelings of achievement and lead to feeling confidence. This is a relatively straightforward method of developing a strategy to defend against anxiety before competition.

The session started with a discussion of the graph showing Andy's Test of Performance Strategies scores. This is depicted graphically below.



As the graph above shows, Andy shows a tendency to set more goals, to have trouble relaxing, to engage in negative thinking and to be more active before competition. This contrasts with in training in which he shows lower activation scores. The difference between training and competition helps understand the difference between Andy's performance in training and in matches. The increased arousal in competition is proposed to lead to a state of over-arousal, which in turn leads to poor concentration. This nature of this poor concentration has been described previously and is usually typified by focusing on the wrong

cue at the wrong time. Given that the ability to control attention is a vital skill in soccer performance, over-arousal can lead to poor performance.

We looked through a series of slides that describing a number of psychological skills. These slides describe the role of sport psychology in a training programme, emphasising the point that psychological skills are rarely practised but are relied on, thus it is not surprising that psychological skills sometimes let us down. I gave Andy a couple of articles that I have written. I adapted these for soccer. Andy should refer to these articles as they describe the process of developing psychological skills. Sometimes when a player undergoes psychological skills training it is difficult to see where the programme is going. I referred Andy to these articles if he is in doubt.

We looked through aspects of confidence. We make the assumption that confidence can be learned. Individuals learn to be confident by recognising success and by controlling negative emotions. One method of gaining confidence is through watching someone you know be successful and saying to yourself, "I he/she can do it, so can I". It was emphasised that Andy should record his successes in training and in matches. Athletes from other sports use training diaries to record their training. The training diary can be used to remind the athlete that he has trained hard and achieved a great deal. In pressure situations, the memory can be very unfair. Even the most successful of athletes can dwell on mistakes. Strikers in soccer sometimes seem to lose all their confidence following a miss. This loss of confidence then goes onto influence future performances, resulting in more misses and a spiral-like reduction in confidence. To break this cycle, the player needs to remind himself of his success. Ability is relatively stable (you do not forget how to kick the ball), but the confidence to kick it in a straight line in a relatively pressure situation is fragile. Players need to defend their confidence and performance reminders are one way to do this.

We looked at situations where Andy showed poor attentional control. We did this by using imagery. Andy reminded himself of a performance in a game where he was overwhelmed by the situation. He did this by using imagery. Andy relaxed himself using centering and then played the imagery in his mind. After doing this, he did a concentration grid. A concentration grid is where the individual has to find a number from a grid of number in sequence. The individual has one-minute to find as many numbers as possible. A concentration grid forces the individual to have a narrow and external focus. The key skill is to look and find numbers. The concentration grid is useful in this context because it can be used to switch attentional style. In this case, Andy was thinking of a match, then performing centering, and then the concentration grid. In short, Andy was learning to control his attention.

Key to the long-term success of this is the notion that Andy is learning to control his attention; when he wants to focus narrowly, he can. Control is the key.

We did three concentration grids tests following imagery. Andy improved each time and achieved very good scores for a one-minute test. This is good.

We discussed the steps for the future. I want Andy to continue to practice centering and to use imagery to develop skills. When he starts training I would like him to perform some centering before he starts, and do some imagery of key skills which he has set as a goal for

the session. I suggested that Andy writes down the goals for each training session in a training diary (a note book would do as a training diary).

For each training session:

- Decide what you want to achieve?
- Do some relaxation training followed by imagery.
 - Imagine yourself performing the skill at full speed from the player's perspective. I would repeat this from the perspective of an onlooker.
 - Try to improve the clarity of images each time.
 - Try to include all the possible distractions that occur as much as possible. The closer the imagery is to real life, the better.
- After the training session, write down how well you think you did. Did you achieve your goals.

Session 3

January 19th

The purpose of the fourth session was to go through some of Andy's psychological skills. We discussed a number of issues surrounding Andy's performance including injury, transfer inquiries, recent performance in training and matches. Included in this was a discussion of how Andy was finding using the mental skills training worked on previously. The key skills that we focused on were imagery, self-talk, goal setting, and relaxation.

We looked at the effectiveness of relaxing training. A heart rate monitor was used with the goal to reduce heart rate as much as possible. In silent conditions Andy reduced his heart rate from 70 beats per min to 50 bpm. This was performed several times. This was interspersed with attempts to raise heart rate. Andy used imagery to do this. Attempts to raise heart rate were not that effective in that Andy showed some elevation but not a great deal. Andy was able to reduce his heart rate to 50 beats per min repeatedly. Relaxation was done with increasing background noise. We discussed issues surrounding the use of relaxation skills in match situations. The dressing room is very noisy on match games and therefore the Andy will need to be good at relaxation skills if these are to be effective. Thus, it is advisable to practice relaxation skills and use imagery to recreate the noises of the dressing room environment. It must be emphasised that relaxation training needs to be practiced for it to be relied on in stressful conditions.

We looked at the imagery skills. We discussed the quality of images. Several aspects of imagery were discussed including the need to have sounds, feelings, smells, tastes, and sights. In particular we focussed sight and feel. We tested this by Andy performing a press-up and then imagining performing a press-up. In terms of sight, Andy reported a score of 5 out of 9 for the clarity of the images. In terms of feeling the movement, he reported a score

of 7 out of 9. Evidently, Andy reported that he is better at feeling the movement than seeing the movement.

The sequence for the imagery test was for Andy to perform the press-up, perform relaxation skills and then to perform the imagery. This was timed. It is important that imagery is done in real time. What was found was that immediately following the press-up Andy's heart rate rose to 90, this reduced to 55 following relaxation, and increased to 65 during imagery. Imagery is a skill that needs practicing for it to be effective. It is often the case that performance declines in the early stages of learning imagery performance. This is because the individual tries to concentrate on too many things at one time. Imagery needs to be automated; to be done using clear images without much thought. To do that the skills needs to be practiced.

We looked concentration skills. This was tested using Concentration Grid Tests. To make the test harder, a secondary task was included. Andy struggled on the Concentration Grid tests when performing the secondary task. The extent to which Concentration Grid performance was hampered seemed to be relative complexity of the second task. When the secondary test was simple, Andy performed much better on the Concentration Grid Test.

Pre-game routine

<i>Behaviour</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Countdown to performance</i>
'Dog for walk'	30-45 minutes. This is active relaxation – a time out.	11 hours
Breakfast	During this some imagery and goal setting takes place.	8.00 – 9.00 am
Around the house	Possibility for a relaxation training session and some imagery. Aim is for maintaining relaxation and focus.	9.00 – 12.00
Lunch	Carbohydrate dinner	1.00 – 2.00 pm
Sleep	Practice imagery skills. Focus on specific skills and rehearse moves for evening game	
Snack	Carbohydrate snack	
6.15 Go on pitch. Chat with other players	Desensitising to stressors. Imagery – picture yourself in the game	
6.30 'Name the team' Tactics /marking opposition		
6.50 warm-up	Imagery during stretching	
7.30	Kick-off	

Perform a press-up

Now sit down and imagine yourself performing a press-up. **Rate how clearly you SAW yourself doing the movement**

	Not clear							Very clear	
Press-up 1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Press-up 2	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Perform a squat

Now sit down and imagine yourself performing a press-up. **Rate how clearly you SAW yourself doing the movement**

	Not clear							Very clear	
Squat 1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Squat 2	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Perform a press-up

Now sit down and imagine yourself performing a press-up. **Rate how clearly you FELT yourself doing the movement**

	Not clear							Very clear	
Press-up 1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Press-up 2	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Perform a squat

Now sit down and imagine yourself performing a press-up. **Rate how clearly you FELT yourself doing the movement**

	Not clear							Very clear	
Squat 1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Squat 2	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Learning a new skill

Plan

Skill being practised _____

Practice environment _____

Conditions _____ Time of day _____

Performance goal _____

Notes

Description of performance

Details of technique

Kinaesthetic feelings

Emotions

Developing tactical awareness

Plan

Skill being practised_

Practice environment_

Conditions_____ Time of day____

Performance goal_____

Notes

Description of performance

Details of technique

Kinaesthetic feelings

Emotions

Practising existing skills

Plan

Skill being practised_

Practice environment_

Conditions_____ Time of day____

Performance goal_____

Notes

Description of performance

Details of technique

Kinaesthetic feelings

Emotions

Arousal regulation

- Using thoughts to raise heart rate and practicing relaxation skills to decrease heart rate.

Heart rate

Heart rate

1. Increased breathing rate
2. Act energized
3. Use mood words
4. Listen to music
5. Use energizing imagery
6. Complete precompetitive work out

Concentration Practice

- Use Concentration type grid to assess concentration. Do this while performing a second task (alphabet backwards).

GRID 1

1	26	59	72	83	46	55	2	56	73
32	60	61	45	10	17	64	95	27	20
11	18	31	89	41	35	54	53	96	57
90	44	8	64	92	63	9	52	3	97
91	23	88	36	4	98	21	34	50	74
12	33	86	87	13	22	28	6	51	58
62	85	29	7	79	42	69	30	40	75
83	84	43	65	16	5	99	71	49	76
82	66	25	37	80	47	70	48	59	39
14	19	67	81	68	38	78	24	77	15

Starting from 8

GRID 2

1	26	59	72	83	46	55	2	56	73
32	60	61	45	10	17	64	95	27	20
11	18	31	89	41	35	54	53	96	57
90	44	8	64	92	63	9	52	3	97
91	23	88	36	4	98	21	34	50	74
12	33	86	87	13	22	28	6	51	58
62	85	29	7	79	42	69	30	40	75
83	84	43	65	16	5	99	71	49	76
82	66	25	37	80	47	70	48	59	39
14	19	67	81	68	38	78	24	77	15

Starting from 66 going backwards

GRID 3

32	20	61	10	17	64	95	27	45	60
90	97	8	92	63	9	52	3	64	44
91	74	88	4	98	21	34	50	36	23
12	58	86	13	22	28	6	51	87	33
82	39	25	80	47	70	48	59	37	66
14	15	67	68	38	78	24	77	81	19
1	73	59	83	46	55	2	56	72	26
62	75	29	79	42	69	30	40	7	85
83	76	43	16	5	99	71	49	65	84
11	57	31	41	35	54	53	96	89	18

Start from 3 going forwards

(list Club team)

GRID 4

32	20	61	10	17	64	95	27	45	60
90	97	8	92	63	9	52	3	64	44
91	74	88	4	98	21	34	50	36	23
12	58	86	13	22	28	6	51	87	33
82	39	25	80	47	70	48	59	37	66
14	15	67	68	38	78	24	77	81	19
1	73	59	83	46	55	2	56	72	26
62	75	29	79	42	69	30	40	7	85
83	76	43	16	5	99	71	49	65	84
11	57	31	41	35	54	53	96	89	18

Start from 64 going backwards

Count backwards from 64

Imagery test

Imagine yourself doing the following:

Sounds

- The crunch as you bite into a crisp apple
- The crash of breaking glass
- The sound of a football kicked hard and sweetly

Feels

- The dimples skin of an orange
- The fur on a tennis ball
- The slippery smoothness of soap

Smells

- The aroma of freshly ground coffee
- The heavy smell of chlorine as you enter an indoor swimming pool
- The smell of newly mown grass on a hot summer's day

Tastes

- The sharpness of a lemon
- The sweetness of honey
- The bitterness of dark chocolate

Sights

- All the colours of the rainbow, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet.
- Your favourite ride at the funfair
- A majestic snow capped mountain.

I suggested that ANDY selects the skills of marking, tackling, and passing and imagines performing to the best of his ability in the peak of competition. ANDY needs to start thinking positively about performance. He needs to stop thinking negative thoughts as these serve to distract his concentration. He also needs to keep his concentration in the 'here and now'. ANDY indicated that he tends to over-analyze performance conducting a whole series of 'what ifs'. This makes concentration more difficult. When ANDY starts having a negative thoughts, he should say 'no; to himself, and refocus using positive self-statements. Similarly, ANDY should not ponder on mistakes. If he makes a mistake he should park this mistake like parking a car or stubbing a cigarette out. The mistake should be forgotten as concentrating on previous performances detracts from concentrating on the here and now.

It was also suggested that ANDY seeks technical advice from the Club coaches. He needs to know how to improve his performance. Given the role of the coach and manager in selection, knowledge of what the coach/manager considers to be good performance would help ANDY direct his efforts to improve performance.

Overall, we discussed a number of different ways in which ANDY can improve performance. ANDY needs to be more positive in his approach. He has a tendency to take a negative focus and attribute failure internally. In future session we will be doing coping under stress and relaxation training.