COLLECTION

The Essentials of Applied Psychology

When Your Mind Steps onto the Soccer Field

Soccer psychology and mental training: pressure, setbacks, and CBT exercises



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What Great Footballers Have Built — And What You Can Do With It

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Emergency Resources

If you're going through a crisis and suicidal thoughts come to you, don't stay alone with them.

- 988 — 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Call or text, 24/7, free and confidential (US and Canada).
- 741741 — Crisis Text Line. Text HOME to 741741 to reach a trained crisis counselor.
- 116 123 — Samaritans, free, 24/7 (UK and Ireland).
- 911 — in case of immediate danger (US and Canada).

These numbers apply to the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Ireland. Wherever you are, findahelpline.com lists helplines country by country.

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Introduction — The Promise, and What Disproves It

You play soccer, you're improving, and a question probably crosses your mind more often than you say out loud: do you have what it takes? This book opens with a promise, and it keeps it: over the past thirty years, research in sport psychology has identified a set of mechanisms that consistently distinguish the most exceptional sporting careers from merely good ones. Deliberate practice matters. How you respond to adversity matters. The ability to read the game before others do, to regulate your emotions under extreme pressure, to hold on to an identity that isn't reduced to your last performance — all of this matters, and matters in ways that are measurable, documented, and replicated from one study to the next. This book will show you, mechanism by mechanism, what this research has established, and above all, how some of these skills can actually be trained — on the pitch and off it.

This book keeps a second promise, less common in books of this kind, and one that is really its true subject: none of these mechanisms, alone or combined, allows anyone — a scout, a coach, you yourself — to identify a future champion in advance. This isn't a rhetorical hedge meant to guard against criticism. It is a conclusion that the research itself forces on us, chapter after chapter, culminating in the book's final part with an examination of what this impossibility actually means in practice: why the talent-scouting industry, despite considerable resources and growing professionalization, keeps getting the most interesting cases wrong. For you, this conclusion isn't a disappointment. It's a liberation: if no one can predict who will go on to greatness, then no one — at fifteen or at twenty — can permanently cross you off the list on the basis of one trial day, one non-selection, or one bad match either.

The Structure of the Argument

This book is built in four movements, and the order in which they unfold is not arbitrary. Part One demolishes three commonly held beliefs that circulate widely in the changing room and in public debate about sporting success — the ten thousand hours myth, the myth of the precociously gifted child, the myth of "mental toughness" — not to reject them outright, but to show that each contains a grain of truth that the stories told about it wildly overstate. Part Two builds up what research actually identifies as relevant: mechanisms that are more discreet, less

spectacular, but far better established empirically than the myths they replace — perceptual expertise, the response to adversity, emotional regulation, and an identity that survives the interruption of performance. Part Three, new to this edition, walks you through four concrete situations that almost every player in training will encounter — injury, not making the team, the role of the people around you, the pressure of the match — before turning, in the fourth and final part, to why none of the above can be turned into a tool for predicting any individual, and why this impossibility has real consequences for how professional soccer recruits its future players today. The book closes with an eight-week program that takes up, in order, the trainable skills identified throughout the chapters.

What This Book Is Not

This book is not a biography. It makes no claim to private information, confidences obtained, or any special access to the people cited. It reports only material that is already massively public — a training regimen documented by the sports press, a date of birth, a court ruling, a statement given in an interview — each time used to illustrate a general mechanism established by research, never as material for reconstructing a complete profile of the person in question.

Nor is it an exercise in diagnosis, or a mental preparation program in the sense the sporting world usually means. No mental disorder is attributed to any of the players cited, and no visualization technique or "winner's mindset" is taught here. When a clinical concept is used — an early schema, an emotional regulation mechanism — it is presented as a pedagogical hypothesis for interpretation, never as an established fact about a real person. Several players pass through this book by way of illustration; none of them receives a finished psychological portrait, and that is a rule this book deliberately imposes on itself: one mechanism per chapter, two or three illustrations at most, never an entire chapter devoted to a single person.

What This Book Is

A work of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) applied to soccer, organized not around people but around psychological mechanisms — deliberate practice, the response to adversity, perceptual expertise, emotional regulation, identity beyond performance. Each mechanism is first explained on the basis of the research that established it, then illustrated with public examples chosen for their clarity, never for their comprehensiveness, before being translated into a skill you can actually train — in a journal, at training, before a match. The goal isn't to help you

understand the specific players cited. It's to help you understand, through career paths made public by the fame of the people who lived them, mechanisms that bear directly on your own relationship to effort, to failure, and to the demands you place on yourself.

If You're a Parent or an Educator

This book is addressed first and foremost to the player. If you're a parent, coach, or educator reading it to better support a child or teenager, you'll find the same material here, but a warning is needed before you put it into practice: Chapter 5 shows that almost every exceptional career has gone through some serious hardship, and that how a person responds to it matters more than how severe it was. This research finding does not, under any circumstances, license deliberately hardening a child's environment in order to toughen them up — the warning in Chapter 5 says so bluntly, and it's worth reading before anything else if that's the question that brought you here. Your most useful role, as the research cited in this book suggests, isn't to manufacture obstacles, but to help the child treat the ones they'll encounter anyway as information rather than as verdicts.

A Note on Method

This book draws on Jeffrey Young's schema therapy on several occasions, particularly to distinguish between two possible origins of extreme self-demand. It also refers, briefly and only in Chapter 3, to the Big Five model, to show that a recent, widely publicized concept — grit — adds nothing to a personality dimension that has already been known for decades. An essential methodological limit needs to be stated up front, and it applies to the whole book: these tools were designed as clinical instruments, validated through the direct self-assessment of the person concerned or through a structured interview conducted by a trained professional. None of them has demonstrated validity when applied remotely, on the basis of media observation of a person who has never actually completed the instruments in question, in this context. Whenever this book refers to an early schema or a personality dimension in connection with a player cited here, it is a pedagogical hypothesis, phrased conditionally, not a measurement. The eight-week program that closes this book, on the other hand, is a full-fledged CBT protocol — self-observation, cognitive restructuring, graded exposure, relapse prevention — that you can apply directly to your own practice.

A second clarification concerns the career data — statistics, records, contractual

situations — mentioned throughout the chapters: most of the players cited in this book were still active professionals at the time this book was written, in 2026. Any figure given should therefore be understood as dated to that period, and may have changed by the time you read this book.