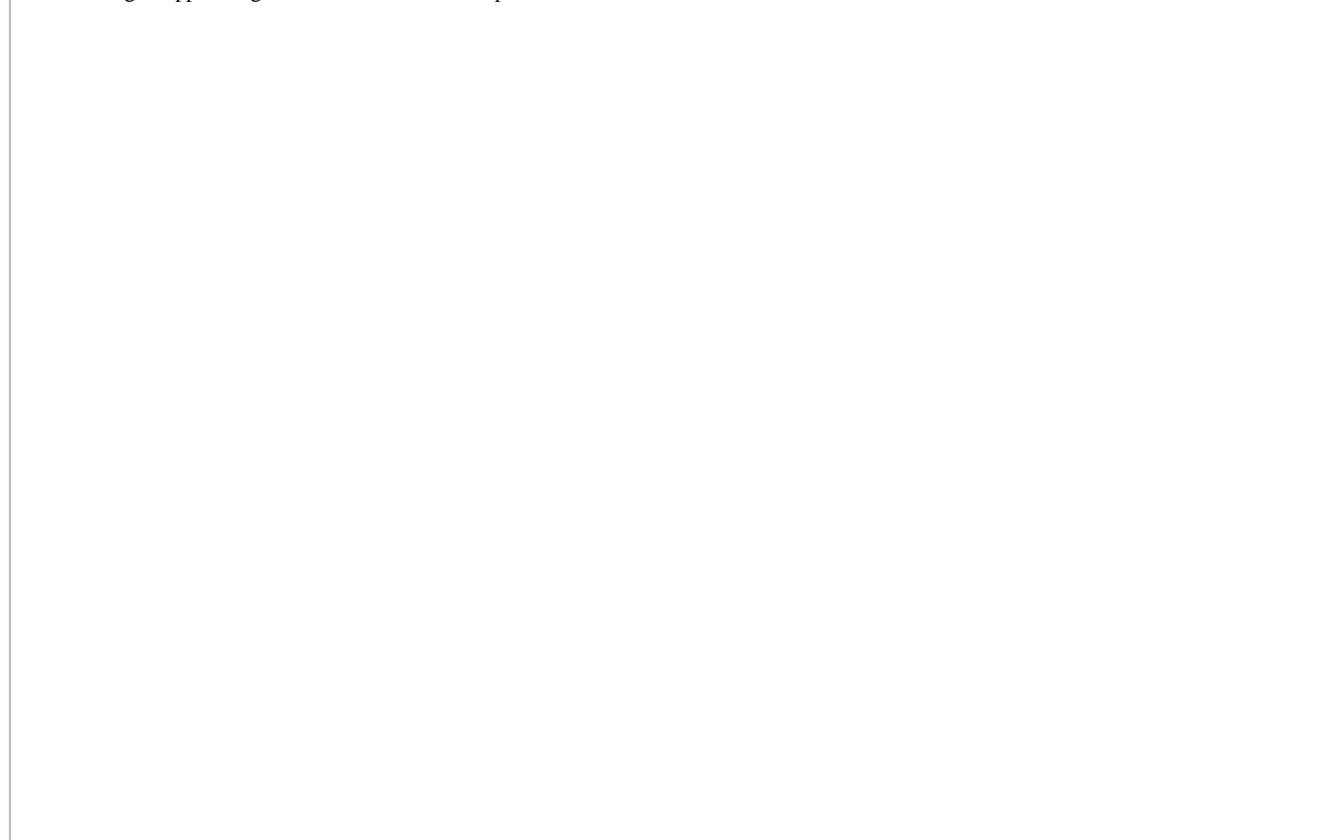


England in Russia 2018: The Psychology of Success and how this can relate to Youth Football

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Gareth Southgate applauding fans at the 2018 World Cup



When **Gareth Southgate** and his England squad arrived in Russia in early June 2018 there was a different feel about the squad and their preparation. The Golden generation had departed and we were left with a group of talented and hardworking individuals, but (**Harry Kane** apart) lacking any box office names.

This was exactly how **Gareth** wanted it and so began the masterplan. The squad was tight, they all had each others backs from day one and there were no club cliques or factions within the 23 man squad - this was England and the players had a common goal.

The squad (as seen on TV) were **together, smart, happy, focused and organised**. There were no attitudes, their media duties were embraced and openness was encouraged. Even with this press freedom, the message remained consistent, they were **quietly confident** and as **well prepared** as any previous England squad. They were encouraged to **visualise success and what it would look and feel like**.

Over the next 4 weeks they would be tested like never before and everything that they had been working on would need to be replicated, on this the biggest stage of all.

They would need to **learn to handle pressure** (could **Harry Kane** deliver?) work on self belief (could **Jesse Lingard** step up on the world stage?) **remain motivated** (after the Champions League was **Jordan Henderson** still hungry for success?) and **remain focused** concentrating on the task in hand.

Harry Kane had been named as Captain prior to the tournament and **Gareth** quite clearly had 100% confidence in him. He lead **by example at all times**, not just on the pitch and epitomised the new England that we were being introduced to. His behaviour had a direct influence on the rest of the squad, he set **high standards from day one** and the rest followed. He would **step up in big moments** (his penalties were vital to our success) and he showed immense courage and self belief in leading from the front.

It is now clear that **Gareth Southgate** had a huge influence on this group of players and those who dismissed him as a “yes” man, boring and lacking in inspiration must now be regretting their short sighted assessment of him.

He knew his players, not just their names and clubs but **really knew them**. He was aware of who had family with them, who might need an arm around the shoulder, who to turn to in difficult times - he **invested his time in understanding them as individuals**. This would be important and the squad reciprocated his interest by warming to him. **Mutual respect** is vital between a coach and his players. When **Fabian Delph** wanted to leave during the tournament for the birth of his child, it was not only allowed but actively encouraged and as such had no detrimental effect on the squad - in fact it probably made them closer still.

He was simply a revelation, but why were we surprised? His **attitude and appearance** were exemplary from day one (we all loved the waistcoat but was there more to that than sartorial elegance?) he showed **consistency and his message was clear** - he meant business. He often mentioned the fact that he wanted his squad to **learn, grow and improve** - his influence within this young and relatively inexperienced group of players was invaluable.

The squad were exceptionally fit (injuries were also few and far between suggesting an organised and committed backroom staff). It has been shown on many occasions that there is a **direct correlation between fitness and improved confidence**.

During their training sessions it was evident that they were **focused, prepared, willing to learn** and to **embrace new and often unfamiliar roles, formations and ideas**. **Body Language** is hugely important and the squad **displayed confidence and a committed attitude every time they were shown training**. It seemed apparent that whilst a starting eleven did develop as the tournament progressed, they were all willing and able to step up to first team duties if needed.

This is another key element in the psychology of managing a successful squad, if you are not picked to start you keep the decision in perspective, remain focused and committed and support your team-mates. The changes that were made during the tournament were seamless and everyone seemed fully prepared if they were called upon. The players had an **air of confidence about them** and this in turn provided them with the **courage to pursue risks**. The aim was to work towards **consistency** not **perfection** as sport can be testing. **Kyle Walker** had been asked to play in an unfamiliar position, in order to compliment the system and as such he had to take risks and commit to learning the role as the tournament progressed. **Gareth** had absolute confidence in him and this was reflected in his performances.

An important aspect of Sports Psychology is that when the **pressure is on you revert to basics** - this encourages the mind to re-set and enables you to tell yourself "I have been here before and know what I need to do to succeed". **Jordan Henderson and Eric Dier** were often called upon to simply slow the game down, keep the ball and revert to basics. When Colombia equalised in the 92nd minute of our last 16 game it could easily have fallen apart, but as the team were walking back to the half way line you could see **Harry Kane** gesturing to the team to **take deep breaths, remain calm and focused** and to go again. The subsequent penalty shoot out win was as a direct result of remaining focused and reverting to basics when under immense pressure.

Hard work pays dividends - this was often quoted by **Gareth** during their time in Russia and it was evident as England were tested several times during the tournament. It is important to **avoid "burnout" as when the body tires the mind follows**. Making key decisions when tired is a key component of a successful athlete. **Productive and positive** self talk at a time when your body is starting to suffer the effects of physical exertion can add that extra 10% that can make all the difference. England had to dig deep on several occasions during the tournament, the desire to stay involved was overwhelming.

Staying strong both mentally and physically is clearly something that England had worked on. **Raheem Sterling** was a shining example, whilst not scoring, his overall contribution in terms of running with the ball and creating space and opportunities for his team-mates should not be underestimated. He had issues outside of sport to address prior to leaving for Russia, but he remained **resilient, mentally strong and focused on the job in hand**. The benefits of **hydration, rest and a healthy diet** cannot be underestimated and these are clearly areas that England paid attention to. **Attention to detail can lead to marginal gains**, which can make the difference.

The penalty shootout that England took part in showed the **mental strength** of the players. **Jordan Pickford** in goal was a vision of professionalism and calmness - he knew that his hours of practice would pay dividends and that **competence promotes confidence**. The team were mentally strong going into the shootout, were not phased by a missed penalty and remained focused until the job was complete. It proved that you can practice and prepare for such an event and if you **revert to basics when under pressure** the result will take care of itself.

The **team mission** was a foundation on which effort and hard work was based. It was clearly agreed that it was unacceptable for anyone in the squad to give any less than their absolute best and to perform at 100% on match days and during training. Even those squad members that were rarely used such as **Danny Welbeck** remained **positive and committed** to the squad goals.

Every player within the squad clearly understood that whilst team-mates, psychologists and coaches were all part of the supporting cast it was **down to each of them as individuals to execute the plan**. They will have been told that they were **ultimately responsible for their own success or failure - nobody else**.

When the journey came to an end after the cruel extra time defeat to Croatia it was really important to reflect **and learn from the experience**. The importance of "bouncing back" is often referred to in sport. Loss **is not the same as failure** - there will always be winners and losers but it is important to realise that if you have given your all no more can be expected of you. Everyone makes mistakes, it is **how you react that counts**. Being in a position to make a mistake means that at least you are involved and you have played a part. England certainly played a huge part in Russia 2018. It was the first major tournament for many of the England squad and it is fair to say that they exceeded almost every expectation.

If you carefully consider the way that Gareth and the England squad approached the tournament and dealt with problems that they had to overcome I feel there is a direct correlation with how to successfully coach in Youth Football.

- 1) **They were organised, smart, happy, tight knit and focused.**
- 2) **He knew his players and they had the utmost respect for him and his ideas.**
- 3) **He had a good backroom team who all bought into his ideas and helped him to deliver.**
- 4) **They stayed calm and reverted to basics when under pressure.**
- 5) **The aim was for consistency not perfection.**
- 6) **Everyone seemed to be genuinely enjoying the experience and supporting each other.**

It could be the local park on a Sunday morning or the World Cup final - the psychology of successful coaching is simple, be organised, trust your players and believe in yourself.

* **Red** - player references

* **Green** - Sports psychology references

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