

Mental Skills Lesson

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SPEAKERS

Julia Price, Paul Barnett, Gary Kirsten, Jim Woolfrey, Jan Kodes, Petr Kotik, Justin Langer, Gareth Baber, Philip Sutcliffe Snr, Tom Ryan, Bill Sweetenham

Paul Barnett 00:00

Welcome to the lessons from the great coaches podcast.

00:04

I've learned that you don't do it alone, you learn so many different things from so many different coaches. That's an elite learning environment.

00:13

How you deal with how to be resilient, how important it is to infuse joy in the process of learning. To be

00:20

a good candidate, you've got to do more than you take. What an interesting way it is to be a leader.

Paul Barnett 00:28

My name is Paul Barnett, and you are listening to the great coaches podcast, where we explore leadership through the lens of high performance sport, by interviewing great coaches from around the world, to try and find ideas to help all of us be better leaders. As the podcast has grown, the great coaches we've interviewed have shared so much insight and wisdom that we decided to create episodes dedicated entirely to the ideas that have resonated with us the most. Today's episode is on the topic of mental skills. And it features audio quotes from a wide selection of coaches that we have interviewed from around the world. The lessons from the great coaches podcast, I'd like to open this episode with an audio quote from Michael Jordan. It's clipped from an old VHS cassette. So please excuse the quality.

01:21

Michael, which were you more proud of your athletic skills or the mental skills that you brought to the game and which was more difficult to keep up?

01:32

Well, I came in here with the physical skills. I was to some degree I was born with Savannah did the appetite to enhance it as I got older and as I played the game, but the mental skills came with the education of the game, you know that either I've learned from Coach Smith before I got here I learned in the course of the coaching staff that I've been injured with the mental part is hard because you have to really learn taking everything that you've learned over a period of time and and apply that to your game and tie that into the physical aspects of your game and make the complete basketball player that you tried to become, you know, so physically was a little bit easier. But the mental part is, is the hardest part. And I think that's the part that separates good players from great players.

Paul Barnett 02:22

Apologies again for the quality but just to repeat at the end, he says, but the mental part is the hardest part. And I think that's the part that separates the good players from the great players. Michael was coached by one of the greatest sports coaches of all time, Phil Jackson. And in his book sacred hoops. He talks extensively about his use of meditation, and Eastern and indigenous American philosophies to help his players develop their mental skills. But he also talks about his own journey and developing these skills, and how they have helped him in all aspects of his life. Today's episode is on mental skills, and it looks at ways that they are developed so that they become strong and enduring. To start the discussion on mental skills, here is World Cup winning cricket coach Gary Kirsten, reflecting on his journey, and his ultimate learning that everyone needs some mental skills training.

Gary Kirsten 03:22

I think we all need some form of training around that we train so much around our physical skills. And then we get confronted in a situation with the highest of pressure. And we don't really have the tools to manage it. I mean, I just think back to as a player to the World Cup semi final against Australia in 1999 in Birmingham, where it was the highest pressure game that I'd ever been involved in. And there was the magician Shane Warne knocks over Herschel Gibbs. And I can see he's kind of delivering on what he's done as a high performer, which was incredible. It's like he's moment in the sun. And yeah, I am as a player who's played a lot of cricket against him. It's matchup two best teams in the world, I mean, to be at the same level of mental skill that he is at. And I'm saying to myself in the Met, I'm not there. I've had no training to get there. I don't know how to deal with this moment. I've got to make my own decisions around what is going to be relevant and not relevant to do and I ended up making a mental error in that game that cost me my wicket, and certainly lead started the demise of our innings. But I just felt that if I'd been a little bit more mentally astute in that moment, it might have really helped me navigate that performance better than what I did.

Paul Barnett 04:44

The starting point for developing mental skills in their teams is often the coach themselves. Here is Gareth Baber. The gold medal winning Rugby Sevens coach talking about his training and mental skills and how he leads it with his team.

Gareth Baber 05:00

I have a mental skills coach and work with the mental skills coach, actually an Australian and works for a company there. And the challenge was consistency, we sort of worked out that we had talent. But again, going back to the personalities, the individuals that we were working with, there was different

varying levels of, if you like, of where that personality set and their ability to mature and take on the information, and most of all, create focus in the ability to perform. And that's not you have to win the gold medal every time you play. But how can you have a consistency in performance? How do you get that into an individual, and then collectively move that on? So we did certainly in that first year, we introduced a lot of mental skills, and those were generated around focus attention. And one of the biggest things that we did is we delivered it through me, I had a relationship as I talked about with the players already, and I've done it in how I always thought I would want to be coached in an environment where I wanted to give them some empowerment, but there was accountability that came with that empowerment, and build relationships with them. But equally, I wanted to take them on a journey towards what I knew they were capable of in terms of delivering above and beyond their potential of what they recognize as their potential. And a lot of that was down to do with mental skills and a consistency of a program around them which delivered daily habits and standards around being a professional player.

Paul Barnett 06:38

Justin Langer, coached the Australian cricket team, and has been vocal for many years on the way that meditation helped his career as a player and a coach. Here, he talks about how physical and mental skills come together, and how concentration is a key foundation for mental strength.

Justin Langer 06:58

People often say that sport is all mental. I don't necessarily agree with that. I think that performance is a synergy between technique and physicality and talent and the mental side of the game of concentration. We're all subscribed to the feeling that elite performance is about concentration. Particularly if you've got a work ethic, you've got some talent and you've developed through hours of practice, you've developed a good technique that doesn't matter what sport it is, it's sustained. But concentration is the core is the essence of great performance.

Paul Barnett 07:33

And Justin's point on the importance of concentration is supported by Wimbledon and Davis Cup team captain winner Yan Kudisch.

Jan Kodes 07:43

For first thing is when you are on the circuit, when you have a big tournament, whatever it is, and you want to win, you can't you have to concentrate on your game. Forget the sister forget the Brother, forget you know, that is always something which bother you my father call because he wants me to pick pick him up at the airport or no, there is always something Nadal he has extremely, extremely important concentration. Because he you can see on him how we everybody makes it make a fun from him than he does days, days days like this, you know and but you know, he doesn't hear if the people are there. He doesn't hear even the even the plane, he's into the match. And it's very difficult specially on Grand Slams. Because the batteries are longer. You play best of best of three sets could be five. So you are concentrate first set second set, but it's alone. Most of the guys, they they cannot concentrate all the time. That's why suddenly they want two sets and suddenly they they lose to the one set or two set whatever then there are some kind of uneven things. mental fitness is very important. Physical and mental fitness is very important.

Paul Barnett 09:04

The state of deep concentration was something that kickboxing coach Petr Kotek spoke to us about he used the term flow to describe it, which in sports is also sometimes described as being in the zone. Flow describes a moment when a person is performing an activity and they are fully immersed in it and are experiencing a heightened energizing type of focus.

Petr Kotik 09:28

Because when you are in the fight, sometimes you're like in France or something the modern word is flow maybe we will get into the flow. Sometimes athletes becomes totally different persons. I had my students in the fight the students was very calm, not expressive person. Back when they got head the person's totally change. He starts to screen he starts to express himself so it was totally different person when the fight stops. He changed his life. For all totally changed, but they understand that because sometimes when I feel like that when I step into the tummy, I become a different person to different worlds, I cannot really explain the stories you must be there to understand persons are really changing in the rain about I'm in a good way in the rank or on the tatami, you can reach your maximum here you can understand really your emotions. Usually, in the competition. I'm surprised not on the training, not in the training. But on the competition. There is a place where I'm surprised when I reached the top of themselves, my athletes.

Paul Barnett 10:40

While concentration is important, so is the discipline required to do it over and over again. And when it comes to this discipline, great coaches take an uncompromising stance, here, his iconic swimming coach, Bill Sweetnam.

Bill Sweetnam 10:55

Whether you're winning the spool 50 meter freestyle, or you're winning the Olympic gold medal, makes no difference. Anyone that fails, because of lack of discipline, because of my coaching inputs. It's my fault. I accept responsibility and accountability for that I don't look for excuses, or don't associate blame. And remember, a reason is an excuse, and no excuse. There's a reason. So I'm uncompromising.

Paul Barnett 11:24

Julia Price was the first female to coach in the men's t 20. Cricket league in Australia. And she also talked to us about the importance of mental skills, and how she went about helping her team develop them during the pandemic, when face to face training wasn't possible.

Julia Price 11:42

But then what we started to do this year, we went on the smiling mind and just we've I've got them starting to do little mindfulness exercises and starting to feel like in the moment a little bit more, stop thinking too far ahead. Like what are you doing right now what's happening with that so, and a few of them have come back. And they've absolutely loved it, they thought it was the best, but something quick that they can do in two or three minutes, mindfulness session while you're before you go and start cooking dinner for your kids or whatever. So the girls found that one really easy to put in, in play. We've also done a little bit of meditation as well. And we've done heaps of peds and readings, you know,

Justin Lang is a big one for all that sort of stuff. So, you know, that was also good about how do you relax and, you know, after a game, how do you, you know, you're really wound up you've got to play again the next day, how do you stop thinking about what you did wrong in the game, or all those sort of things. So the meditation again, is also about relaxing and switching off and how do you and then you can start to lessen that and do that in between overs and then in between balls and you know, then suddenly becomes part of your life constantly.

Paul Barnett 12:43

One of the best descriptions of mental skills from the interviews we have done comes from wrestling coach Tom Ryan, who uses the story of James Stockdale, an American who was a prisoner of war for seven years in Vietnam, to illustrate the importance of combining realism with optimism.

Tom Ryan 13:01

Like the Stockdale paradox, right Stockdale was the pow that made it out, right? His story's incredible. And this guy was when they interviewed him when he came back, right? They interviewed Stockdale. You said, what was it that made you get through that others didn't as a prisoner of war. And he said, the ones that don't make it do not live in the perfect combination of realism and optimism. There's an intertwining of optimism and realist, right. They didn't make it. They were overly optimistic. Every single holiday they thought would be the last one spent as a POW. And they were gonna get out Thanksgiving, Easter, Christmas. They were going to get out they never got out. Right. They ultimately died of a broken heart. And Stockdale, his mind stayed in reality, I believe I'll get out. I don't know when right realism and optimism I'm going to get out. I just don't know when I'm not going to put a date on it.

Paul Barnett 13:56

To finish this episode on mental toughness, here is Irish boxing coach Philip Sutcliffe, senior. Phillip is a terrific role model in his community. His gym has reduced world and Olympic champions. And he makes the point that the discipline that drives mental toughness comes from the teaching that happens in the home.

Philip Sutcliffe Snr 14:18

And Coach water salt, it'd be like a social worker, especially these days with so many children. The amount of children that's on antidepressants under 11 years of age, even in this country is terrible. The amount of drugs has been pushed on young adults. Apart from the social messages will keep appealing but life in our schools he took I'm not saying to hit children, but children have to learn discipline from growing up and basically come from your house. If you don't see discipline in your house. They simply hang up your coat. Only really put your school bag away. Did you do your homework? You need to do your chores this week. Did you put out the bins, little things like that come into effect follows. That's the discipline and then it goes to school. It makes it easier for a teacher to teach it to someone sit down want to learn the warm tonight English, French, maths German, any subject that they want to learn. It makes it easier for the teacher because of all these children of ABC and D C H and Garment District, but this natural way instead of trying to sort out, now I'm not going to be the man when they come to the gym that they want to be in. Most boxing gyms have rules. And if you don't stick to the rules, and they want to stay bottom, don't stick to them rules below to know. And it's a hard lesson for boxing is a disciplinary product. If you have a gym that just wants to teach to the art of physical culture, the boxing,

the boxing gym, they should be open in every school in the country. And it make teaching easy for the teachers. But as I said, teaching comes from the home. And that's where teaching.

Jim Woolfrey 16:02

We hope you enjoyed our episode on mental toughness and found one or two things that you can bring to your own dinner table, locker room or boardroom table for discussion. The key lessons I've taken away on the topic of mental toughness from our great coaches are a focus on creating mental toughness starts at the top with you as the leader. Your mental toughness is driven by discipline and your ability to concentrate. As a leader, you helped shape the standards within the team or the organization when it comes to these areas. And training that helps you improve mindfulness will help with your ability to concentrate here at the great coaches podcast. We're always trying to learn so please let us know if you have any feedback, just like Mads Clausen who said, thanks very great podcast. No, thank you Mads. It's the interaction with people around the world who listen give us great energy. And so if you have any feedback or comments, please let us know. And all the details on how you can connect with us are either in the show notes or on our website, the great coaches podcast.com