

7 'Costly' Mental Game Mistakes That Block



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7 'Costly' Mental Game Mistake That Block Soccer Players' Success

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Your Soccer Mental Game

"The most important attribute a soccer player must have is mental toughness. Before you can win, you must have the will to prepare to win."

~Mia Hamm

Soccer is a fast paced, physical game with no time outs to regroup after mistakes. One mental lapse can lead to a bad pass or missed clearance that could change the outcome of the game. You have to be prepared--mentally and physically--to play at your peak for 90 minutes, and often longer when a game goes into overtime. Your teammates rely on you and vice versa. Therefore, your level of mental toughness can help you thrive in soccer by boosting your confidence, coping with adversity, and performing at your peak, especially under pressure.

Soccer players and coaches spend hours each day training to improve speed, strength, and skill, but rarely do they train the mind. For this reason, soccer players would benefit by improving their mental game skills. Soccer players who lack mental toughness might have low confidence, lack of composure, pregame anxiety or tension, and many other



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mental game barriers to success in soccer. Without complete mental toughness, your performance can be tentative or inconsistent at best. The first step to improving your mental game is to understand what's holding your back.

What is Mental Training in Soccer?

The goal of mental training is to help soccer players and teams perform their best by improving their mental skills to excel in practice and games.

By focusing on the mental strategies needed to be successful in competition, mental training helps soccer players learn how to get focused before games, stay confident after mistakes or losses, and stay composed under pressure. The best soccer players in the world don't just train their bodies, they train their mind too.

We've assembled the top 7 mental game mistakes soccer players make that block their success and how to overcome each one, which we call "Score with Your Mental Game."

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1. Leaving Confidence to Chance

Do you leave confidence to chance? Do you have to make a good play before you feel confident? Confidence is paramount to playing high-level soccer. If you have belief in your ability, you're less likely to become anxious before big games or high-pressure situations such as overtime, penalty kicks, or tryouts. If you wait to score, save a goal, or make a good pass before feeling confident, you're prone to having very unstable confidence.

You don't want your confidence to be pushed around by immediate results (or mistakes) at the start of the game. What happens if you start the competition poorly with a couple mistakes? Your performance suffers if you react to the mistakes with self-doubt!

With reactive confidence, you are less likely to recover from mistakes. You want a proactive approach to confidence – not a reactive approach.



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Score With Your Mental Game

Your objective is to be more proactive with your confidence. We teach soccer players how to be proactive with their pregame confidence. Proactive confidence means creating a stable level of belief in your skills that is not easily shaken and that is based on years of practice and play.

How do you get stable confidence that is not easily rocked?

You remind yourself of your past accomplishments and reasons why you deserve to play with confidence. To do this, write down past accomplishments, small successes or awards, and abilities you possess in soccer. Your confidence should be stable and based on your lifetime of training. It should not change due to one mistake in a game. Try to recall the reasons you have to be confident before games and practices—bring it to the field.

Having high confidence does not come easy for most soccer players. To learn more, check out our soccer specific mental training Workbook and CD program [“Soccer Confidence: Mental Toughness Strategies for a Competitive Edge”](#)



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2. Placing Strict Expectations on Performance

Do you place unrealistic demands or expectations on your performance in games? Do you become frustrated when you don't meet your own expectations? We think that maintaining high or strict performance expectations can actually limit your success in soccer. One soccer player we worked with would think, "I MUST score two goals today." When he did not score in the first half, he would check out of the game mentally.

Why do high expectations limit performance? First, you set yourself up for a success/failure proposition. From the above example, you either score two goals or you don't. Second, if you don't achieve your predetermined expectations, you might question your ability that day: "Why am I not reaching my expectations?"

Essentially, expectations set you up to fail before you even start because most players will set extremely high expectations, such as "I can't make any mistakes." You might doubt your ability to score at all, just because in one game you didn't get two goals.



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In addition, expectations are usually based on desired results or stats. Soccer players often judge their game based on these expectations. In most cases, your expectations equal pressure and pressure can turn into pregame anxiety or trying too hard to meet your expectations. The score is important, but focusing on it, will not help you perform in the moment.

Score With Your Mental Game

Your goal is to replace expectations with more manageable objectives, which help you focus on the process or execution instead of results. An example of a manageable objective in soccer would be, "I'm going to get in the box for every cross." Instead of focusing on the expectation to score two goals, which creates pressure and tension, you should direct your attention to getting in position to score by making a confident and decisive run into the box.

Here are other examples of manageable objectives, also called process goals:

- Go in hard on tackles
- To keep my shape on defense
- Check into the passing lanes

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Learn more about how to play in the moment with our full mental training program, ["Soccer Confidence: Mental Toughness Strategies for a Competitive Edge"](#)

3. Worrying Too Much About Outcomes

Do you worry too much about winning or losing the game? Do you stress out about your stats for the game? Pregame anxiety can come from several sources depending on your level of confidence and how you interpret it. Each player reacts differently to stress and adversity. We believe that most anxiety and tension comes from focusing too much on results or more specifically, the consequences of results, such as disappointing a coach or teammates.

You block your ability to take shots, make the through pass, or execute on a free kick when you are too worried about making mistakes and what teammates might think when you do. In addition, worrying about letting teammates down does not allow you to focus on the here and now and perform in the moment.



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If you focus only on avoiding mistakes and failure, you'll under perform and not reach your potential. You will also feel more doubt, which sabotages your confidence.



Score With Your Mental Game

One of the most powerful mental strategies to improve your performance is to simply let go of any concerns about the outcome and instead focus solely on the process of execution. For example, instead of worrying about letting goals in, a goalkeeper should focus on relevant performance cues, such as cutting off the angle, punching the ball away on corners, and communicating with his defense. Bottom line: focus on what you want to do instead of what you fear.

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You want to let go of results and focus on the process. A process mindset often takes time for soccer players to achieve. If you want to develop mental toughness, you have to work hard at it just like you do with your physical skills. If you find yourself worrying about the outcome, refocus quickly on the current play and ask yourself what you can do to execute the play.





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4. Psyching Yourself Out Before Competition

Do you compare yourself to your competitors before soccer games? Do you feel outmatched before the game even starts? If so, you are psyching yourself out of the game because you are focusing too much on your competitors' prowess. This will make you feel as if you don't "stack up" or deserve to win.

You can lose confidence quickly when you make comparisons to other soccer players or teams who you think are better than you. It's impossible to play with high confidence when you're intimidated by the competition.

Score With Your Mental Game

Your objective when you warm up and play is to focus on your assets and talents not your competitors. You want to reinforce your strengths, focus on your pregame preparation, and refocus your mind when you begin to compare yourself to the competition.

If you feel intimidated by the competition, take some time during warm-ups to take slow breaths and think about your



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strengths and talents. You have more important things to do during warm up than gawking at the competition.

Focus on your own talent by visualizing a time that you played your best. Think about getting physically and mentally prepared for the game, not the other team.

5. Allowing Fear of Failure to Shut You Down

Are you afraid of making mistakes? Do you fear that you will let down your coaches if you don't play your best or score goals? Fear of failure is a huge topic challenge for soccer players because many over-motivated, perfectionist athletes under perform due to fear of failure.

What is fear of failure?

Fear of failure occurs when soccer players are afraid of making a mistake, losing the game, or not performing well. The root causes are complex, but fear of failure usually starts when you worry about what others might think about you when you fail. You may experience anxiety, worry, tension, or pregame anxiety. You'll likely perform tentatively and play "safe" if you are afraid to fail.



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Common fears related to failure:

- Do you fear losing a game, your starting position, or getting cut from the team?
- Do you fear embarrassing yourself?
- Do you fear letting down teammates, coaches, parents, or friends?
- Do you fear not playing up to your potential?
- Do you fear not meeting expectations of others?
- Do you ever fear putting in all the work and not getting the “pay off”?
- Do you fear that others will not approve of your performance?

Understanding the source of fear is the first step. Then you can disarm the fear head on by developing a healthy view of your sport.

Score With Your Mental Game

The objective is to perform freely and intuitively without the mental handcuffs of fear. This requires you throw away the fear. How do you throw away the fear? First, you must understand it. Next, you must rationalize and debate your own



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irrational fears and find the freedom to choose your mental attitude.

As stated, most fear of failure relates to social approval or having the need to gain respect or approval from others. Often this turns into not wanting to let down or disappoint others. You have to know why you play. Do you play for yourself and not others? What are the right reasons or motivations to participate in soccer?

Fear of failure is a challenge that is fully addressed in our soccer mental training workbook and CD program, ["Soccer Confidence: Mental Toughness Strategies for a Competitive Edge"](#)

6. Lack of Pregame Mental Preparation

Do you ever become distracted by the fans, the weather, or an unexpected delay? Do you find that it takes part of the first half to become focused and get into the flow of your game? Do you lack focus or have doubts before competition?



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To play or perform your best, you need to be thinking about the right things, especially during warm-ups before you begin playing or performing.



A number of things can cause you to get off-track mentally, especially just before a game or competition. Having a consistent pregame routine will help you focus on the game ahead.

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With a good pregame routine, you have total control of your mental preparation prior to games. Do not leave mental preparation to chance or external forces that you can't control, such as your opponents, weather conditions, or the referees.



Finally, you want to move from a "practice mindset" and enter competition with confidence and focus. Be proactive and take personal responsibility for your mental game or mindset before every competition!



Score With Your Mental Game

Your objective is to develop a focused pregame routine that instills confidence and trust in your skills. When you prepare



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mentally for a game or competition, you're getting psyched for it. Routines are one way to do that. With a pregame warm up routine, for example, you prepare mentally and physically the same way before each game.



The goal of mental preparation is to get your mind ready for the game in a way that lets you play or perform with confidence, composure, and intensity. That means playing consistently—doing well game after game. The top soccer players in the world—Lionel Messi, Wayne Rooney and others—are consistent performers because they understand the importance of mental preparation.

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You want to develop a pre-game routine that works for you. Some soccer players prefer to get pumped up and listen to their favorite music. Other players prefer to relax and focus on their objectives for the upcoming game.



What mental skills are important for a good pregame routine? You want to let go of pressure-packed expectations so you can focus on the process. You should remind yourself why you deserve to feel confident. Finally, you want know that practice is complete and it's time to trust in your skills. Get the most out of your skills at that point in time.



7. Losing Composure After Mistakes

Do you take yourself out of the game mentally after a few mistakes? Do you dwell on past losses or missed shots? Are you easily frustrated and engage in negative self-talk after mistakes?

Many high-level athletes become frustrated after making mistakes. It's likely that your competitiveness drives you to be the best you can be, which is very positive and powerful. However, some athletes who maintain extremely high expectations are prone to become frustrated and dwell too much on their mistakes. When you have high expectations for your performance, it's harder to stay composed.

Like many soccer players who struggle with their mental game, you might dwell on mistakes and beat yourself up for missing a break away or giving the ball away. The downward spiral of one mistake leading to another, and another, is all too common.

When you become frustrated with mistakes, your performance suffers. You might begin to rush your passes, wanting to make up for the mistake you made. Anger and frustration usually



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causes players to make more mistakes. Finally, dwelling on setbacks or mistakes inhibits your ability to focus and execute on the next play.

Score With Your Mental Game

The goal is to remain composed by staying in the moment and focusing 100% of your concentration on each play. Composure is the ability to stay even-tempered, level headed, and have a calm mind when you are challenged by mishaps or mistakes.

What expectations might cause you to become upset during competition if you fail to reach them? What are expectations? Anytime you say to yourself, "I should do this..." Or "I need to accomplish..." Or "I must do..." it's probably an expectation. Your expectations are usually about something you demand of yourself, teammates, or other people.

Expectations usually look like this:

1. "I must play perfectly today."
2. "I cannot make any mistakes if I want to win."
3. "My coaches or parents expect us to win today."
4. "To play my best, I can't make any mistakes."



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You also want to learn how to think or react differently to mistakes. You want to be able to stay positive, keep your composure, and move on to the next play.



Try these statements the next time you make a mistake:

- *"Let it go, focus on the next play."*
- *"It's in the past, keep working hard."*
- *"I'll have more opportunities, keep taking shots."*

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How Can You Benefit From Mental Coaching?

Mental training in soccer is about improving your focus and mental game skills to help you perform your best by improving your confidence, focus, composure, and ability to perform under pressure. Below is a list of the top ten ways that you can benefit from sports psychology:



1. Improve focus and deal with distractions. Many soccer players have the ability to concentrate, but often their focus is displaced on the wrong areas such as when you think, "We need to get a goal", which is a result-oriented focus. Much of our instruction on focus deals with helping athletes stay focused in the present moment and let go of results.





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2. Block out doubts and grow confidence. Doubt is the opposite of confidence. If you maintain many doubts prior to or during games, you won't be able to perform up to your ability. It is imperative for players to have high confidence, even after mistakes or losses.

3. Stay confident setbacks and errors. Soccer players with very high and strict expectations, have trouble dealing with minor errors that are a natural part of sports. It's important to address these expectations and also help soccer players stay composed under pressure and when they make mistakes or become frustrated. Players will learn how to move on from mistakes and how to refocus back on their game.

4. Find the right zone of intensity for peak performance. We use intensity in a broad sense to identify the level of intensity or activation that is necessary for each soccer player to perform your best. Feeling "up" and positively charged is critical, but not getting overly excited is also important. You have to find the balance between being excited to compete; yet not getting over-excited or anxious.

5. Help teams develop communication skills and cohesion. A major part of soccer psychology and mental training is helping



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teams improve cohesion and communication. The more a team works as a unit, the better the results for all involved.

6. To instill a healthy belief system and identify irrational thoughts. One of the areas we pride ourselves in is helping athlete identify ineffective beliefs and attitudes such as comfort zones and negative self-labels (i.e. "I'm a loser") that hold them back from performing well. These unhealthy beliefs must be identified and replaced with a new way of thinking. Unhealthy or irrational beliefs will keep you stuck no matter how much you practice or how hard you train.

7. Improve or balance motivation for optimal performance. It's important to look at your level of motivation and also why you are motivated to play soccer. Some motivators are better in the long-term than others. Soccer players who are extrinsically or externally motivated often play for the wrong reasons, such as the athlete who only participates in soccer because of a parent's desire. We work with athletes to help them adopt a healthy level of motivation and be motivated for the right reasons.

8. Develop confidence post-injury. Some soccer players find themselves fully prepared physically to get back into



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competition and practice, but mentally some scars remain. Injury can hurt confidence, generate doubt during competition, and cause a lack of focus. We help athletes mentally heal from injuries and deal with the fear of re-injury.

9. To develop game-specific strategies and game plans. All great coaches employ game plans, scouting reports, and proper warm-up to help athletes mentally prepare for competition. This is an area beyond developing basic mental skills in which a mental coach helps athletes and teams. A mental coach can help soccer players and teams develop effective goals and a focused mindset to execute their game plan.

10. To identify and enter the “zone” more often. This incorporates everything we do in the mental side of sports. The overall aim is to help soccer players enter the zone by developing foundational mental skills that can help athletes enter the zone more frequently.

How Does Mental Game Coaching Work?

The first step in mental coaching is to identify your mental game strengths and weaknesses. We first send our students an



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AMAP or Athlete's Mental Aptitude Profile. This serves as a guideline and helps you think about the right questions when we meet in person or talk over the phone. We then ask you more questions about your mindset and beliefs based on your AMAP so we can develop a complete picture of your mental game.

The next phase is to develop a mental game plan, which guides the work we do together. The mental game plan outlines what we need to improve and includes some basic mental game skills we teach all our students such as how to focus on the process and identify self-limiting expectations.

Once the mental game plan is developed, we would begin our work on mental skills that apply to your specific challenges. We give you a customized soccer mental game program that will tackle your specific challenges.

What is the Next Step?

The next step is to decide if mental coaching is right for you and what mental coaching program best suit your needs. We offer several "levels" of programs that are custom tailored to your individual or team needs. Here are the options:



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1. One-on-one coaching in Orlando with follow up.
2. One-on-one phone or Skype coaching from anywhere in the world.
3. Email or virtual coaching as a premium member of our online mental training system www.peaksportsnetwork.com
4. Mental toughness programs for teams.

Is For Mental Game Coaching For You?

Find out if you can benefit from mental coaching! Download our free *Mental Game Assessment for Soccer Players*.

Please download our soccer psychology and mental game assessment. It will only take you about two minutes to complete the assessment. This will help you determine if you need to work with a mental game coach. Download it here for free:

<http://www.soccerpsychologytips.com/mental-game-assessment-soccer/>

Contact US

For more information about soccer psychology or mental coaching, please call 888-742-7225, or visit our website at:

www.SoccerPsychologyTips.com

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Get Expert Mental Game Coaching



Mental training expert, Dr. Megan Melchiorre, specializes in sports psychology strategies for all athletes. She has worked with youth, junior, high school, collegiate, and professional soccer players. She is a certified Mental Game Coaching Professional (MGCP) and is the director of mental game coaching at Peak Performance Sports. She has 25 years of experience in the sport environment, being an athlete, coach, and mental coach. Dr. Megan works with junior, high school, and collegiate athletes to improve their confidence, focus, and other mental game

challenges that block success.

Call us today at 888-742-7225 for more information about personal mental game coaching with Dr. Megan.

Dr. Patrick Cohn is a master mental training expert at Peak Performance Sports. Dr. Cohn works with athletes and teams worldwide from a variety of sport backgrounds including soccer players and coaches. As the president and founder of Peak Performance Sports (Orlando, Florida), Dr. Patrick J. Cohn is dedicated to instilling confidence and composure, and teaching effective mental game skills to help soccer players and teams perform at maximum levels. He also teaches parents, coaches, and athletic trainers how to help soccer players achieve peak performance through mental game skills.



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