

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS IN YOUTH SOCCER IN NIGERIA.

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A. INTRODUCTION

The superlative performances of our youth soccer at both U-17, under 20 and under 23 championship since 1985 when Nigeria Youth captured the whole World in Japan has left no one in doubt that Nigeria youths are exceptionally endowed. But unfortunately such performances at the junior level have not really translated to consistency superb performance at the senior category level where we have experienced fluctuations in performance and at times near disaster outings. The reason for such disappointing outings at the senior category are multivarious amongst which are ^{leadership in the} poor management of youth soccer success; poor psychological state of affairs, lack of appropriate incentive, exodus of players to foreign countries, controversies over shared match bonuses, and more. The import of this paper is to consider the psychological factors that could enhance and boost the continuity of youth soccer success.

B. PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS IN YOUTH SOCCER

Success in Youth soccer and of course all sports in general depends to a greater extent on quite a number of psychological factors. The importance and relevance of such psychological factors should be continuously emphasised because of the effects they have on the level of performance improvement. These are leadership, Personality structure, Affiliation, Emotion, Motivation, Communication skills/Strategies, ~~and~~ and Health Psychology amongst others.

These particular factors are specifically chosen for discussion because of the great influence their effectiveness^{have} for personal growth, interpersonal relationship and advancement in identifiable goals.

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1. LEADERSHIP

Leadership is the most valued concept in sports settings as it involves two ways interactions between a leader and the led. In this direction the leadership behaviour of the coach must elicit a reaction from the players. This also include the process used in making dècision, the type, quality and frequencies of instruction, the immediacy and effectiveness of feedback or reinforcement given in respect of player's performance, the techniques or strategies used in motivating them and the type of communication between them and ~~the~~ interrelationship or rapport established between^{them}. The positivity of all of these will enhance the players improved performance or behavioural patterns.

Four components are known to have influenced the effectiveness of a leader in a sport setting. These are the leadership styles which could be autocrative, democratic, leizze-faire or father type. The second is the qualities of the leader, which are usually related to his personal qualities such as being optimistic, competent, assertive, innovative, tolerant, highly intelligent and flexible, ambitious, dynnamic and positively focussed.

The third component centres on the ability to assess the environment and respond to the situational demands such as change of weather condition, playing field conditions, increase or decrease in size of team and inadequacy of facilities or limited equipment.

The ~~four~~th is centred on responds to followers characteristics. A good leader will consider the challenges brought about by the individualities within the group in relationship to personality,

ability level, age, sex, experience, type of sports and complexity of the skill.

Each of these components must interaction and the best conditions must be explored if success is to achieved. A situation where the leader behaves without cognisance of the situational factors or the followership characteristics, there would create dissonance and not much could be achieved.

The professional training of the coach, the administrator or manager and the sport psychologist ought to have exposed them to how best to demonstrate good leadership qualities.

2. PERSONALITY STRUCTURE

The understanding of the personality structure of individuals within the team will help in advancing achievement in youth soccer. The players' physique, temperament, intelligence and interest would reflect on their types of movement patterns and commitment to level of soccer skills attainment. A proper understanding of the individual differences, would assist in helping them to attain their maximum potential in their skill levels.

3. AFFILIATION

Many youth participate in soccer because of the affiliation and peer group interaction. The group goal is very crucial and importance for their existence. The social content and relevance are of immense value where the group dynamism create great challenge for the youth. Therefore the sense of belonging should be sustained through the achievement of group goals, orientation, productivity and group success.

The sense of belonging and sharing of group success and failure should be of importance. Other factors that ^{could} enhance affiliation bother on group cohesion and unity of purpose. The group's joint achievement may be the most valued reason for attraction and elasticity of affiliation. When such group goals and successes are attained and sustained the affiliation wax stronger for improved performance. There should be ample opportunities created within the soccer climate for free association and affiliation.

4. EMOTIONS

The ability to maintain and sustain the relative emotional stability of participants in youth soccer will play a major role in determining the level of achievement of individual success. A situation where the youths are exposed to excessive anxiety, stress or constant negative rebuke or unnecessary punishment would not augur well for success and growth.

Many atimes, Nigeria youths had to contend with the problems of non payment of their match bonuses or late release of their entitlements.

This put them on undue stress thus dis-stabilize their state of mind. Consequently, they are exposed to distraction, the resultant effect is usually failure.

4. MOTIVATION

Motivation has been described as an urge, arousal, drive, energiser or motive which spur a person to action (Ikulayo, 1990), and a powerful activator without which little or no learning can take place. It is therefore considered to be the most important consideration in terms of behaviour modification, exercise, practice and training adherence. Motivation either intrinsic or extrinsic must be optimally and appropriately applied to yield the corresponding outcome; their negative or positive outcomes depend extensively on effective selection for appropriate situation. There are many approaches and techniques of motivation, depending on the needs of the individuals, though the intrinsic motivation had been recommended but the socio-economic value, inherent in the present day's participation in soccer have induced the shift of emphasis and no wonder that a slight lateness in the payment of the footballers allowance always result into threat of a boycott or abandonment of a match. Perhaps, sports administrators and managers should look for ways of varying the high premium put on monetary reward for our soccer players.

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5. COMMUNICATION SKILLS

In the field of sport we communicate verbally and non-verbally. Sometimes communication skills are not effective at other times, they create problems. It is therefore important to be able to express oneself. In situation where both the coach and the players have problem of communication or there is a gap, or in a situation where there is miscommunication or lack of adequate communication, performance would be hampered..

Within the team, it is important to be able to send effective messages, such that would not be misinterpreted. To avoid this, the message must be clear and audible and understandable, easily comprehensible and be sure that it would have the desirable effect. Some coaches talk too much and with very little action. Such coach would easily put off the players and make them feel bored. There must be understanding of gestures or non-verbal language. The process of effective communication must be perfected between the players and players, between the coach, players and other participants on the field of play for example, the referee, the doctor, the psychologist, and the physiotherapist.

C. HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY

The consideration of the health and welfare of the players are very crucial if they are to be encouraged to perform their best at all times. The training, practising and competitive environments should be such that are conducive to performance and not hazardous. Therefore the competitive environment should be injury free. Eating disorder should be checked and situations leading to burnout and overtraining should be avoided. Constant sickness and frequent injuries could cause a high rate in dropout and negative attitudes towards soccer. Insurance policy for the players should be constantly reviewed and renewed, for total commitment on the part of the players. It is essential to note that the players would perform their best if they are aware that their health and welfare are being catered for.

D. PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

The need for the services of the sport psychologist in assisting footballers can not be over emphasized. No matter the amount of physical skills attained without the proper psychological skills, not much could be attained.

As I have said in many past sports gatherings and professional conferences, sport performance is 50 percent physical and 50 percent mental. To achieve the utmost there must be a total blend and harmony between the body and the mind.

In the preparation for any competition, a full complement of the following are needed in the soccer camp:

1. The sport psychologist
2. The Medical Doctor
3. The Exercise Physiologist
4. Physiotherapist.
5. Nutritionist.

The complementary role of all of these personnel will provide psychologist boost for the players. It would also help their minds to be stabilized and thus enable them to concentrate more effectively to the task at home.

The way and manner the coach would assist the players to get ^{over} their anxiety is not the way the professionally trained sport psychologist would handle the players anxiety. All fields within the sports specializations have become professionalised.

The fact that some of the mentioned experts are denied of the players is an indication that the nation do not really value their (players) contributions to national development.

If the nation does, then they (players) should be provided with the best services available so that they (the players) could perform their best at any given time.

E. CONCLUSION

This paper considered some important psychological factors that could enhance performance in youth soccer. The writer is of the opinion that coaches, administrators and sport managers should understand those factors, their importance and relevance to performance improvement so that they can explore strategies for their effective application and utilization. The health and welfare of the players were part of the focus as factors contributory to improved performance.

This paper has expressed the dire need of the employment of the services of sport psychologists and that of nutritionists in the permanent scheme of training and development of soccer players in the country so that discovered talents are properly groomed to ascend to elite footballer status without a premature transition out of soccer playing - Nigerian youths are physically endowed, the nation owes them a duty to provide them with the wellwithal that would make them successful football heroes.

Thank you for your attention.

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