

Motivation is more than a question of winning and losing

By Darren Treasure

I once played soccer with a kid called Mark. Mark was a very successful youth soccer player who was always one of the better players in any team he played for. Indeed, Mark represented the National schoolboy U15 team. About one year later, however, Mark dropped out of soccer. He said that soccer had stopped being fun as he wasn't the best player anymore. It was clear that Mark could only feel successful if he was number one and did not want to play if he could not achieve this goal.

This anecdote illustrates how important it is for coaches and/or parents to understand the ways in which their players perceive success in soccer, and the significant effects these perceptions may have on their motivation to play the game. Specifically, how hard they try in practice and during games, whether they persist when the going gets tough, and whether they practice skills that will help them get better even if they are not presently very good at them. Research has found that for children under the age of 10 high ability is generally implied by learning, or by success at tasks they are uncertain of being able to complete. They do not judge ability with reference to performance norms or social comparisons. They can be induced to adopt another's performance as a standard, but normally they make self-referenced rather than social norm referenced judgments of ability. For young children, when more effort is needed for success, this implies more learning which means more ability in their world. In a real sense, effort is ability for children under the age of 11!! Because young children cannot differentiate effort from ability, they do not have the cognitive ability to understand winning and losing. If you do not believe me, go watch any U09 game, for example, and listen to the first question a child asks as he/she comes off the field. If it is not "where's my snack?" it will be "Did we win?" The child at this age understands that winning is important, loves to compete, but does not understand winning and losing in any systematic sense. Because of this, they will not feel sad until a parent or coach informs them that they lost and accompany this information with a positive or negative emotional reaction.

Around the age of 11-12 years, however, children develop the capacity to differentiate ability from effort and now understand that effort can only help their performance up to their current level of ability. For example, at this age a slow player recognizes that no matter how hard they try, they will not out-run the fastest player on the team. As a consequence of this developmental change, after the age of 11-12 individuals can choose to define success in two different ways, namely in a child-like fashion in which improvement and effort are critical, or a more adult way in which outperforming others' is stressed. These different ways of perceiving success manifest themselves in an individual's task or ego goal orientation. Ego oriented individuals perceive success in terms of winning and outperforming others and believe that if they outperform someone with minimum effort they have demonstrated an even higher level of ability. These individuals believe that success is determined by ability and that cheating and deception may be acceptable behaviors if they enable them to achieve their goal of winning.

In contrast, task oriented individuals perceive success in terms of getting better and trying hard. Research has demonstrated that task oriented individuals will remain motivated even in times of adversity, for example when they are losing, as they perceive success in terms of trying hard and attempting to improve. For example, the center forward who misses a few chances will continue to run into space in the attacking third of the field and accept the responsibility of taking shots at goal. Ego oriented individuals who are successful are likely to engage in the same positive

behaviors. However, when ego oriented individuals begin to doubt their ability they are likely to begin to withdraw effort and engage in negative behaviors to protect their perceived soccer ability. For example, you may find ego oriented forwards drifting further and further back after they have missed a few chances. They may explain this by stating that they want to “create from the back”, or begin to blame their teammates for their inability to get the ball to them in the attacking third of the field. Although this behavior may seem illogical to you, it makes perfect sense to the player as they are attempting to preserve their now fragile perception of ability. After a while it could be that these ego oriented individuals who doubt their perceived ability, much like my friend Mark, choose to drop-out of soccer all together as it no longer provides them the opportunity to feel successful as they do not achieve their goal of being the best compared to others!!

In an activity in which performance during childhood and early adolescence is so closely linked to physiological, motor skill, cognitive and other psycho-social developmental issues, it seems sensible to promote task orientation. By emphasizing outcome and winning (ego orientation), less mature children are likely to make inappropriate perceived ability assessments when the demonstration of high ability is restricted to those children who are currently the top performers. For example, small children who struggle to compete against their bigger, quicker peers may choose to drop-out of soccer prematurely because winning is the only way they feel successful. In addition, task orientation should be fostered with those children who are currently the top age group performers. Why is this important? As in other activities, children move from one soccer team to another, from one competitive level to another, and from one age group to another. When this occurs it is unlikely that the hierarchy of ability is continually based on the comparison of ability to others, an individual’s perception of high ability may weaken which may lead to maladaptive behaviors, including, potentially, withdrawal from the game. From a motivational perspective, therefore, it is important that we as parents and coaches attempt to promote task orientation in our young players. By providing ways of defining success other than winning, we can ensure that our players remain motivated throughout their soccer career. Research with elite level athletes has shown that these individuals are high in both ego and task orientation. They feel successful when they win and outperform their competitors, but they also appreciate the fact that this may not always be possible. There may be occasions when they lose and/or perform badly and in these times of adversity it is important that they view success in terms other than outcome if they are to remain motivated.

The issue remains, however, as to how to enhance the motivation of our players by encouraging the development of task orientation. Research has shown that the parent and/or coach is critical in the active construction of a child’s perception of what is valued in the youth soccer context. Parents and coaches should critically evaluate what they do and how they do it in terms of task ego goals. For example, how do you define success for your players? Is it in terms of development and effort, or winning and losing? Do you design practice sessions that challenge your players which will lead to development, or do they repeat well learned skills that, although, increasing the probability of winning, may delay development? How do you evaluate performance? What behaviors do you consider desirable? Do you congratulate players when they win and outperform others or when they try hard and improve? How do you react when the team wins or loses?

Persuasive evidence exists to suggest that by making certain cues, rewards, and expectations salient a parent or coach can encourage a particular goal orientation and in so doing affect the way a child perceives the soccer experience. If we are to ensure that all youth soccer players are optimally motivated coaches should, therefore, work hard to establish an environment that promotes task goals: a developmentally appropriate environment in which children are evaluated on their skill development and effort and not their comparative performance and ability.

Darren C. Treasure, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Sport and Exercise Psychology at Arizona State University. He is also an adjunct faculty member of the USSF National Coaching Staff