

# PERFORMING UNDER PRESSURE

Making sure England's Junior National Academy players deliver when it really matters is an important business. Neale Harvey talks to the people who help make it happen...

It was England's World Cup-winning Head Coach Sir Clive Woodward who coined the phrase about "the top two inches" being all-important when it came to winning closely contested rugby matches. "The mental side of sport is massive," he once said. "It isn't necessarily the best team with the most talented players that wins games, but the team that can think correctly under pressure." And who could argue after the events of 2003?

Mental strength and a positive mindset are now universally accepted prerequisites for success in elite sport. Which is why the Rugby Football Union, under the guidance of Performance Director Chris Spice, decided to invest in a company that trains England's best young rugby players to deliver world class performances under intense pressure.

Gazing Performance are a team of mental skills coaches who've worked with the RFU since 2003 to provide a simple and useful way of enabling players to become better at the basics and to deal better with pressure. Formed in 1998 by

psychobabble. Instead, they seek to take players to new levels of performance via clear paths and by using practical tools.

When players are put under pressure they often respond emotionally, losing track of what they're supposed to be doing.



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— *Mental Skills Coach Martin Fair*

four partners, including Chief Executive Martin Fair, a former captain of Coventry RFC, Gazing claim not to deal in science or

Blown off course by pressure, they become distracted by diversions that prevent them from achieving their optimum

performance, which is in turn detrimental to the goals of their team. When everything else is equal, being able to operate under pressure can mean the difference between winning and losing.

While some will argue that experience is the key to success – and it remains a significant factor – Fair believes that performance under intense pressure is a skill that really can be taught. And in the increasingly high-octane environment of elite sport, having that string to your bow provides a significant competitive advantage. Experience is no longer enough.

"There's no doubt that experience plays a part in dealing with pressure situations, and Martin Johnson was a good example," said Fair. "Martin was very different as a player under pressure at 32 compared to when he was 22. That came from years of playing in intense and demanding situations. What we're now trying to do is speed that process up.

"When you look at performance you can't just say that it's all about skill or talent. You have to ask what the components are. There are five areas of performance: physical stamina, technical

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ability, tactical skills, logistics and mental agility. Top sports people need all five and, if everything else is equal, it's the mental side that really makes the difference.

"Once that's acknowledged you can either hope that a player has genetic mental agility. Or you wait for them to gain it through experience. Or you can develop it. If you then acknowledge that you really can develop it, then it can be described as a skill you can learn."

Developing the mental skills to perform under pressure may sound daunting, but the reality is much more straightforward. The trick for any player is to recognise

when he or she is straying 'off task', into what Gazing's Operations Director Bede Brosnahan describes as 'the red zone'. To illustrate the point, Gazing provide players with 'maps' that enable them to stay focused on the job in hand.

Brosnahan, a Seido Karate Black Belt who's competed internationally for New Zealand, explains. "If you think about another skill – say, passing the ball – there are certain key principles, like grip. So we have to take the same attitude with mental skills. What are the key principles and what's the starting point?"

"The starting point is the brain, >



> because that drives everything you do. You've only got so much attention in your brain and it's very easy to get overwhelmed by diversions. So what high performers do is use their attention really well. And if someone's not performing well, you need to ask, 'What's happened to their attention?'

"What the map tells a player is that their attention can be in two places: it can either be in the blue zone – on task and focused – or it can be in the red zone, when you're diverted and that bit of the brain is going: 'poor me, not fair, too hard, what's going to happen next?' – all the peripheral stuff in a game, like the crowd, the referee, the

pitch or your league position. It's not the existence of those things that's the problem; it's when your attention is focused on that.

"Everybody gets diverted; it's nothing to do with positive or negative thinking. But what top performers are able to do is recognise that they're getting distracted and get back on task. If something's really important to you, you'll probably stay on task anyway. But all the map does is create greater awareness for individuals."

Gazing's methods have proved effective for a number of England's Under-21s over recent seasons. England stars of the future such as Tom Rees (Wasps), Tom Varndell

(Leicester Tigers), Topsy Ojo (London Irish) and the outstanding Leeds Tykes quartet of Danny Care, David Doherty, Jordan Crane and Tom Biggs have all benefited from the company's techniques and are performing consistently well in the glare of the Guinness Premiership.

Fairm and Brosnahan are far too modest to claim credit for developing those individuals – mental aptitude is, after all, just one of dozens of facets that make up an elite rugby player. But there's little doubt that heightened mental awareness enables such players to perform under pressure and is an evolving aspect of game preparation that's with us to stay.

"The RFU wanted us to introduce a common language and framework for dealing with the development of performance," adds Fairm. "We're not psychiatrists or psychologists, but it's common sense that if you focus on the things you do, then you're more likely to perform. We're trying to provide a solid platform of mental skills so that when players move into the senior squad they're able to cope." ●

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## 5 Top Tips To Improve Your Performance Under Pressure

### 1. Acknowledgment

Acknowledge that the mental aspect is one of the contributory factors to performing under pressure.

### 2. Attention

The mental side of sport is determined by where your attention is focused. It's about focusing on what you need to do and concentrating on the processes. Then commit to what you're doing.

### 3. Control

Once you've acknowledged the mental aspect and focused your attention, it's about controlling that attention. You can actually choose where you place your attention.

### 4. Goal

The goal is to be mentally 'on task' at all times – i.e. Focus on what you need to do.

### 5. Predict And Prepare

Predict potential diversions (such as injuries, falling behind, poor conditions etc.) How often do people switch off when things go wrong? Predict what might divert your attention and prepare your response to those diversions.