

Cognitive Training- Tovo Institute- Todd Beane

Are your players cognitively fit?

If you are like most coaches that may be a tough question to answer.

But why?

I might suggest that it is not a question you have had to answer before. I know that it was not a question that I addressed as a young coach myself.

My task was to train passing, shooting, and dribbling to prepare my players technically, yes. My task was to position my players to prepare them tactically, yes. My task was to prepare players physically, yes. With technical, tactical and fitness training sessions, my federation smiled upon me. The license was in the mail. All was good between the lines and the coaching road was well paved before me.

Then something happened. I studied pedagogy, exploring the art and science of instructional methods.

Why would anyone do that, you ask? A fair question. In full disclosure, a question my worrisome mother asked as I ventured deeper into collegiate debt.

I wanted to become a better educator and thought that understanding how children actually learn might be useful information. Call me crazy, I know.

The revelations of my graduate studies...

1. There is no teaching without learning.
2. Those that teach in alignment with the way children learn are more effective educators.
3. You can recover from debt if you find a job.
4. Your mother still loves you.

Loosely defined, cognitive development is the construction of thought processes, including remembering, problem-solving, and decision-making. From birth, we begin to actively learn. We gather, sort, and process information from around us, using the data to develop perception and thinking skills. Cognitive development refers to how a person perceives, thinks, and gains an understanding of his or her world.

Not surprisingly learning requires fitness. Cognitive fitness. Our players need to hone an ability that was gifted to them at birth. Our players, on the pitch and in real time, must perceive their environment, conceive of the options available to them, execute the best option and assess the efficacy of that decision.

A continual cognitive loop firing in milliseconds leading to decision upon decision for 45 minutes and another 45 after the break. That is a stadium full of cognitive processing.

“What we have discovered is that a key factor for an effective transfer from the training environment to reality is that the training program ensures ‘Cognitive Fidelity’, this is, it should faithfully represent the mental demands that happen in the real world.” – Professor Daniel Gopher

As we learn how critical it is to master this process and to apply it to the field of play, we can no longer ignore its value. And thus we can no longer ignore it as coaches. In fact, if we are not training football intelligence, what good is the technique of kicking a ball, the tactic of pressing high or the ability to run deep into extra-time?

With my federation diploma in hand, I had to go back to the drawing board to ensure that my trainings were cognitively faithful to the demands of the real match. My players above all else, or at least on par with all else, should be cognitively fit. And I should dedicate myself to training them accordingly.

“In pretty much every area, a hallmark of expert performance is the ability to see patterns in collections of things that would seem random or confusing to people with less well developed mental representations.”

“The best players recognize and respond to the patterns almost instantaneously, taking advantage of weaknesses or openings as soon as they appear.” – Anders Ericsson

The research within and beyond sport abundantly confirms that we have only scratched the surface of understanding the full depth of the learning process. However, what we do know is often ignored on football pitches worldwide.

Perception is the ability to scan one’s environment and filter to the most relevant data.

Conception is the envisioning of possibilities within that environment. A **Decision** is for the player to make in real time.

Deception is to send misleading data to the opponents engaged in their own perceptive process.

Execution is to pass, to shoot, and to dribble with technical precision.

Assess is to evaluate the efficacy of the action taken and to loop back into perception.

Let's loop back to my coaching.

If I ensure that each training exercise engages the player intellectually I am a better educator. It is that simple. Kicking a ball back and forth without thought – in the garbage. Tactical trainings without position play understanding – in the garbage. Senseless running – in the garbage.

“Behind every pass, there must be a thought.” – Dennis Bergkamp

Sometimes pruning can be liberating. Sometimes starting all over even more so.

To train players to be cognitively fit we must demand that they activate their brains in minute one of training and continue to think for as many minutes as possible within a session. Red cards to the drills that do not encourage thought. Red cards to the drills that numb the mind. Futile drills be gone. Enter intelligent training that trains intelligence.

Rondos nurture cognition, competence and character.

Position Play exercises nurture cognition, competence, and character.

Training Games nurture cognition, competence, and character.

It may have taken me a while, maybe too long. But I know now that my younger self did the best he could with the information available at the time. But times have changed and so must I. My task is to ensure that my players develop their intelligence so that they are capable of seeking space, finding solutions, and executing good decisions in the face of an adversary.

We train the brain now. Every session. All season.