



Psychological and behavioral foundations: a focus on discipline and mental toughness in youth football development

Fundamentos psicológicos y conductuales: un enfoque en la disciplina y la fortaleza mental en el desarrollo del fútbol juvenil

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Abstract

Introduction: Becoming a professional football player is the dream of every boy in Indonesia because it can be watched and loved by many people. However, the path of development towards professional players is not easy. There are many challenges and problems that football players must face.

Objective: This study aims to determine and explore what key behaviours football players must possess toward professional players.

Methodology: This study used qualitative research methodology to answer its objectives. It examined and obtained information from 10 coaches with a football coaching license and experience of at least five years. Researchers collect research data through interviews, observation, and document analysis, which are then triangulated so that the data obtained is not solely from one source.

Results: The results showed that football players must possess two key behaviours to reach the professional level, namely discipline and seriousness and playing during the development path.

Discussion: The data obtained reveals several behaviours, but discipline and seriousness are the key factors or main behaviours needed to become a professional football player.

Conclusions: With this information, it is hoped that coaches and everyone involved in football player development can focus on training programs to develop these two behaviours. Coaches will also be more easily able to detect players.

Keywords

Discipline, mental toughness, football development, sport psychology.

Resumen

Introducción: Convertirse en un jugador de fútbol profesional es el sueño de cada niño en Indonesia, porque puede ser visto y amado por muchas personas, pero el camino del desarrollo hacia jugadores profesionales no es fácil, hay muchos desafíos y problemas que los jugadores de fútbol deben enfrentar.

Objetivo: Este estudio pretende determinar y explorar qué comportamientos clave deben poseer los jugadores de fútbol hacia los jugadores profesionales.

Metodología: En este estudio se utilizó una metodología de investigación cualitativa para responder a los objetivos de este estudio, en el que se analizaron y obtuvieron información de 10 entrenadores que tienen licencia de entrenador de fútbol y tienen experiencia como entrenador de fútbol durante al menos cinco años. La entrevista, la observación y el análisis de documentos son tres formas utilizadas por los investigadores para recopilar datos de investigación que luego se triangulan, de modo que los datos obtenidos por los investigadores no provengan de una sola fuente.

Resultados: Los resultados mostraron que existen dos comportamientos claves que deben poseer los futbolistas para alcanzar el nivel profesional, a saber, la disciplina y la seriedad de los jugadores durante el camino de desarrollo.

Discusión: Básicamente son varias las conductas que se desprenden de los datos obtenidos, pero la disciplina y la seriedad son los factores claves o conductas principales necesarias para llegar a ser un futbolista profesional.

Conclusiones: Con esta información se espera que los entrenadores y todos los involucrados en el desarrollo de los jugadores de fútbol puedan enfocarse en programas de entrenamiento para desarrollar estos dos comportamientos, además de que los entrenadores también detectarán más fácilmente a los jugadores.

Palabras clave

Disciplina, fortaleza mental, desarrollo del fútbol, psicología del deporte.

Introduction

Developing young footballers into professional players is the primary goal of all club stakeholders. However, there is still much room for improvement in research related to youth football (Sugiyama & Garcia, 2019). Football is not just about scoring goals but also teaches how a player grows as a better individual on and off the field. In this context, becoming a professional footballer involves technique and physicality and building strong character through good behaviour. A player who wants to reach the peak of achievement needs to develop aspects of discipline, commendable attitudes, communication skills, respect, seriousness in training, and sportsmanship that are fostered from an early age. According to Fauzee et al. (2012), mental development begins with implementing a training model that emphasizes character growth to be better. This is because good character reflects the quality of the football player himself.

The character of a football player is characterized by positive actions that can be represented through actions or words; in this case, the participation of children in sports has a positive impact on the character, one of which is the athlete's disciplined attitude (Mishra & Ray, 2010; Nuryadi et al., 2024). Children involved in competitive sports from an early age generally have good discipline because they have been taught time management during training and while studying at school. Discipline development is an important aspect of competitive sports development because a disciplined player can consistently perform on the field (Konoval et al., 2021; Shi & Qu, 2022). Developing athlete discipline requires support from parents and the ability to lead coaches during the training process. Coaches have their leadership styles, and each style reflects the behaviour of the athletes they coach.

Sports development is a positive place to apply values such as respect for others, perseverance, self-confidence, and healthy habits, which implicitly create an atmosphere for learning life skills (Chinkov & Holt, 2016). These values characterize the seriousness of athletes in training and competing, which, of course, are factors that distinguish ordinary players from extraordinary players. A young player who is serious about training will develop faster than a player who plays for fun. Young football players need to understand that hard work, dedication, and sacrifice are required to become professional. Sports psychology skills are an important point for the success of an elite athlete, and this is by the results of research (Akbar et al., 2024, Bell et al., 2022; Low et al., 2019). Psychological skills can be a coping mechanism to overcome pressure in training and competition, where athletes will learn that pressure does not have to damage performance on the field (Low et al., 2023).

Behavioural coaching for young football players is essential because it is the primary foundation for shaping players' character in the future. Without good behavioural coaching, young players are susceptible to negative attitudes such as lack of discipline in training, low respect for coaches and fellow players, and unsportsmanlike actions such as provocation and cheating in matches. Holt and Dunn's (2004) research on the psychosocial competencies of successful football players and using a developing basic theory approach, research results show that discipline, commitment, perseverance and social support are competencies that football players must have to achieve success. Research on the key aspects of grassroots football players needs to be studied to facilitate the development of young players into professional-level athletes.

Method

This research uses a grounded theory approach proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), namely Evolved Grounded Theory (EGT), which emphasizes theory development. EGT is a research methodology that significantly appeals to various scientific disciplines because of its explanatory power. Strauss and Corbin (1998) show the evolution of grounded theory, which requires time and theoretical sensitivity to move continuously from data to theory. In qualitative research, three data collection methods can be used: interviews, observation, and document analysis (Lebar, 2021; Gibson & Brown, 2009). This research follows the principles of Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory, so data is collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis. Integrating various methods in the data collection process covers a method's weaknesses, giving reinforcement and confidence to the researcher in discovering and obtaining more comprehensive data.



Participants

Ten football coaches from Indonesia participated in this study. The criteria for participation were youth coaches with at least five years of experience and a coach with a football coaching license. Coaching experience is a valuable resource that can significantly impact the development and training of future football players (Watts & Cushion, 2017). Additionally, the coaching process in sports is intricate and distinctive, requiring both formal education from coaching licenses and informal knowledge gained through practical coaching experiences (Werthner & Trudel, 2006). To make it easier for readers to understand this article, the researcher gave the codes JI for Indonesian coaches who participated in this study. The researcher also attached a table of participants in this study.

Table 1. Participant Information Indonesia

No	Age	Licence	Coaching experience	Status
J11	30	C	10 Years	Active
J12	38	C	12 Years	Active
J13	31	C	6 Years	Not Active
J14	43	B	17 Years	active
J15	53	B	16 Years	Active
J16	49	B	15 Years	Active
J17	45	B	18 Years	Active
J18	42	A	14 Years	Active
J19	36	A	13 Years	Active
J110	42	A	6 Years	active

Procedure

This section will explain the research procedures, from research instruments to data analysis so that readers can understand how this research was carried out systematically and objectively.

Instrument

The instrument used in the current research was examined for face and content validity. Regarding content validity, two experts in football, one in psychology, and two in qualitative research examined the instrument. The Cohen Kappa analysis was used to test the validity result, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Cohen Kappa results

Expert A	Expert B	Expert C	Expert D	Expert E	Kappa Coefficient Min
42-21	40-21	39-21	37-21	42-21	K=
K ₁ =	K ₂ =	K ₃ =	K ₄ =	K ₅ =	K ₁ +K ₂ +K ₃ +K ₄ +K ₅
42-21	42-21	42-21	42-21	42-21	5
0.952	0.904	0.857	0.761	1.000	0.894

Data analysis

The data analysis system in this study uses Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory approach, which involves progressive coding techniques that move data analysis from description through conceptual sequencing to theory. In the grounded theory approach, data is analyzed systematically to develop a theory that emerges from the data itself; this process involves several steps, starting with open coding, axial coding and selective coding, as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Data analysis in this study was also assisted by N-Vivo 14, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software that can help organize, code, and analyze research data efficiently and efficiently (Ekasatya & Afriansyah, 2016). In the data analysis process, the researcher also transcribed the research data by playing back the recording of the interview process and listening carefully to the recorded interviews, which were then put into writing. Transcribing data from 10 coaches took quite a long time because researchers needed to listen to around 1,643 minutes of research recordings, or the equivalent of 27 hours and 34 minutes. Converting audio into transcripts of research data conducted for each participant resulted in 560 pages of transcripts with double spacing and using Times New Roman font size 12. After the data transcription process, the researcher returned the transcripts to the participants. This was done to agree that what the participants said was the same as what was intended in the chat meeting process. The next stage is for researchers to analyze the data that has been obtained, starting with open coding



and axial coding and continuing with selective coding, which also uses N-Vivo 14 software as a tool to manage data obtained from interviews and document analysis. N-Vivo helps researchers manage and separate data according to the categories and themes obtained. For more details, the researcher explains the data analysis process in this study following the development of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results

The behaviour that football players must possess during their development is discipline; this is the main foundation that football players must possess in addition to other aspects. All the coaches interviewed stated that discipline is an important aspect for players. If players do not have discipline, they will not achieve success, as stated by JI10, namely, "without discipline, it is finished". Discipline in football coaching itself involves many things, relating to the time of arrival of players for training, rest time, food intake and also discipline in using predetermined football equipment; this is to the statement from coach JI8, namely, "the best characteristics in my opinion, one discipline, discipline in terms of the first thing we have the most timing, if training at 4 o'clock, at the latest at 3.30 already wearing new shoes then the food factor". In line with the previous statement, JI9 also said that:

"First of all, discipline in dress, full dress, because we want to familiarize ourselves as pro players, have to wear long stockings, have to wear shin guards, we start from teenagers, then we go into tactics and technical discipline, we go into defensive discipline, attacking discipline, transition. So, everything goes back to the basics of discipline; if we play with discipline, technique, and tactics, it will be easier for us to achieve."

Coaches in Indonesia also agree with what coaches in Malaysia said: discipline is one of the key factors in the success of the football player coaching pathway. JI2 stated, "First, clear discipline with time, discipline in daily activities such as playing cell phones, and discipline in eating also affects. The most important thing is discipline; if not disciplined, they will be like ordinary people". Coach JI9 added:

"Another important thing is discipline in training; if we practice at 7 am, he must arrive 30 minutes early, even before the coach arrives. So they can warm up before the training process. Not only in the training process but also in how he manages his lifestyle, how to rest, not stay up late, eat and so on. The point is discipline first."

Discipline is one of the behaviours football players must have in their development path. This also applies to players in the project squad because these players will live in a dormitory with their teammates; they need mental toughness because they are far from their families and have less comfortable surroundings, in line with what was conveyed by coach JI1, namely, "physically and mentally you have to be strong, otherwise you really cannot stay here. A boy who lives in a dormitory, wherever he is thrown, he can live, he is already independent, we want to know his mental toughness". Based on the statement above, coach JI8 gave the view that,

"For the underage level, in terms of the psychological aspect, players cannot give up quickly; they need mental toughness. Because, even at the underage level, the pressures or pressure from the coach, meaning the demands from the coach, make the player need mental toughness, especially sometimes the coach gets angry, angry because he did something wrong and so on, so the demands from the coach that require the player himself to be mentally strong".

Mental toughness in the development path to becoming a professional football player in the future has a significant impact because they are still in the process of formation, so there will be many challenges they need to overcome, and whoever survives will be the one who will succeed in becoming a professional football player in the future, as conveyed by the coach JI2:

"It requires a strong mentality, and it can be seen in the game because of the process that a player goes through if he is not mentally strong, not really disciplined, not really ready to fight the challenge, to fight the severity of the training and that will make him lose."

Discussion

Discipline

In this study, discipline is one aspect that is widely discussed by the football coaches who accompany this study. Sugiyama et al. (2017) state that the Root Root football Academy expects physical development, discipline, teamwork and communication. Discipline is essential because it is the basis for learning or success in something; it is also the main principle that supports achievement and motivation; discipline helps a person achieve goals and maximize potential (King, 2023). Discipline makes routines more organized to manage time more effectively and avoid procrastination (Tedesqui & Young, 2018), contributing to the timely completion of tasks and more quality results.

Discipline also plays an important role in fostering positive habits; these habits, such as frequent exercise, regular study, or good time management, can significantly improve individual achievement (Tonnessen et al., 2015). Discipline is not just about obeying the rules but also about awakening the self and achieving life goals; with discipline, one can face challenges more effectively and achieve maximum accomplishment. Coaching with more consideration for the quality of athletes requires guidance with the power of discipline, self-awareness and respect from coaches (Denison et al., 2017). Young players who develop discipline through football will have better skills in managing time and responsibility, which is very beneficial for developing leadership skills (Safarikova, 2012).

Mental Toughness

Mental toughness is not just about motivation and control over daily training and competition issues but more about the strength to recover from injuries and setbacks, such as the strength to turn challenging situations into opportunities and the ability to transform the unexpected, such as injuries, into experiences (Komatsu et al., 2021). Mental toughness is a combination of qualities that allow a person to prepare themselves physically and mentally to overcome challenging training and competitive situations in the development path to becoming a professional football player. Athletes with mental toughness have a disciplined mindset and remain calm, focused and enthusiastic under pressure or competition; they can maximize the flow of positive energy even in adverse conditions (Meizara & Dewi, 2018). Athletes, coaches and sports psychologists consistently cite mental toughness as one of the most important psychological characteristics associated with success in elite sports (Akbar et al., 2023, Cowden, 2017).

One aspect of psychology that can provide motivation and positive feelings so that athletes can control themselves and make decisions to achieve peak performance in training or competition situations is mental toughness (Wolter et al., 2021; Bae & Cho, 2021). Studies have shown that mental toughness and competitive anxiety are negatively correlated. In other words, the higher an athlete's mental toughness, the lower the level of anxiety, and vice versa (Wolter et al., 2021), so it can improve the athlete's psychological well-being (Bird et al., 2020). The effects of mental toughness mentioned above need to be possessed by under-17 players in Indonesia and Malaysia to face the rigours of the training process, match pressure, and readiness to face injuries that always lurk in football players' eyes. Coaches must emphasize and develop players with a strong mentality as an important personality trait for better performance. This data clearly shows that mental games can significantly influence performance positively and negatively (Gardner & Gilbert, 2024). As such, elite athletes and teams now often work with sports psychologists or mental performance coaches to give them an edge over their competitors (Terry & Si, 2014).

Conclusions

Discipline is an essential foundation in the development path of football players under 17. The natural talent and technical training will not develop optimally and sustainably without discipline. Discipline in this context includes good time management, compliance with the coach's instructions, consistency in undergoing training programs, and the ability to control oneself both on and off the field. In this early age phase, the characters and habits embedded will be the basis for forming a winning mentality, a

strong work ethic, and long-term physical and emotional readiness. Besides discipline, mental toughness is crucial in shaping competitive and resilient young players. They face various challenges, such as competitive pressure, risk of injury, failure in matches, and high training intensity. Mental toughness allows players to stay focused on long-term goals, bounce back from failure, and maintain motivation despite tremendous pressure. An unyielding attitude, self-confidence, and the ability to remain calm in critical situations are the result of strong mental development.

By fostering discipline and mental toughness early on, young players are prepared to compete technically and are moulded into emotionally and professionally resilient individuals. Both of these aspects are important provisions for facing the complexities and demands in the world of professional football in the future. A limitation of this study is that none of the participants held an A Pro license from the Asian Football Confederation. Although the researcher tried to obtain participants with the highest license in Asia, various obstacles such as participant refusal, time constraints and the coach's busy schedule prevented their participation in this study. Suggestions are also given to future researchers; it is hoped that improvements to this study will produce more relevant and up-to-date information, given the dynamics and changes that continue to occur in the football world. Young players are the hope and strength of the country to achieve achievements in the national football team. Therefore, training young football players with good physical, technical, and psychological skills will significantly determine the national football team's future success.

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