

It's The Final Countdown

As showpiece finals loom large on the sporting calendar, **Jeff Thornton** investigates how coaches should prepare their athletes and teams for success come the big day.



The new suit is immaculate, the turf superb, the pool calm, or the ice as smooth as a billiard table; the atmosphere is buzzing and the sun shining. It's finals day – the day you have been dreaming of, hoping for, working to reach. Or it's the tournament for which you've been striving to qualify for months or even years. But what now?

Well, as a coach, this is where you earn your corn. Your athlete or team has made it this far, well done...but the cruel reality is that the winner is the one who goes down in the history books, gets their name on the trophy, basks in the headlines – whether it be of their local newspaper or the national media. You don't really want to have to read the adjectives attached to your competitor, even though 'gallant' is a wonderful thing to be!

In this situation, the coach has much to consider, and experts point to two real areas with one overriding theme. You need to plan, and you need to plan both the physical and conditioning work, as well as the psychological approach.

But first, as Clive Brewer, Head of Human Performance at the Rugby Football League (RFL), stresses: 'In sport, you can't focus on a final until you've got there! The process for focusing on an end point is different for team and some individual sports. For example, in athletics, four-year plans can be made, encompassing preparation for a small number of really key events, such as national, European, world and Olympic championships. Team sports tend not to operate like that, and planning is based upon progression through progressive rounds with regular competition, every week or even every few days.'

Saying that, as Brewer points out, from the strength and conditioning point of view, many of the key elements are the same, whether it's an individual or team event.

'When you arrive at the start line, or cross the line on to the pitch, you are aiming to have the maximum fitness and minimum of fatigue. Again, circumstances will vary from event to event and sport to sport, so one size does not fit all, but if you take a big season-ending finale such as an FA Cup Final, Heineken Cup Final or Super League Grand Final, you have several days to build towards it.'

Of course, these events are at the end of long, hard seasons which have taken their toll physically and mentally. 'You still need a structured week,' says Brewer. 'Volume fatigues players, so you take the volume down. You'll have a similar number of sessions, but it's the sharpness and intensity which will be high, while the length of the sessions comes down.'

'Your normal during the season may be a one-and-a-half hour session, so here you'll have the same number of sessions, but each of perhaps 45 minutes instead. You would give the athlete more recovery time.'

In the case of a finals tournament or tour – often just as important as a one-off game for those involved – planning needs to be just as careful. Brewer says: 'A good example there would be in rugby league; after the Grand Final, we have the Four Nations tournament. For that, we're not looking at building up players' fitness, we are looking to maintain the fitness. However, you can't ignore the training, you are still doing ▶

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Clive Brewer's key points:

- 1 / Attention to detail. Got to plan every menu, every meeting room, that the hotel is right.**
- 2 / You need an idea of where the players are physically. We, at the RFL, utilise a number of techniques and methods – how they are performing in training (eg through GPS monitoring), their heart rates, speed tests, neuromuscular system tests, recovery monitoring, wellness testing etc. The more data the better. Sport has moved on so much.**
- 3 / You need to minimise as much volume as possible, without compromising the players' preparation, and keep the intensity as high as you can.**
- 4 / Got to have relaxation and recovery strategies for away from training. Physically, we have massages, ice baths, the best nutrition, but you also don't want players thinking about the final or the game 24/7. For example, in the Four Nations, the England team went tenpin bowling.**
- 5 / Try to maintain routines and systems in preparation for key events – do not introduce anything in the event that hasn't been rehearsed in training.**



1986	S GRAP	GER	2007	J HENIN	BEL
1987	I MAJOLI	CRO	2008	A IVANOV	BUL
1988	A SANDER VIZRO	ESP			
1989	S GRAP	GER			
2000	M PERCE	FRA			
2001	J PARRIAH	USA			
2002	S WILLIAMS	USA			
2003	J K. WOODS	BEL			
2004	A MYSRINA	RUS			
2005	J HENIN-HARDENE	BEL			
2006	J HENIN	BEL			

Russia's Svetlana Kuznetsova celebrates after winning the 2009 French Open.

those two or three weight sessions and working on anaerobic endurance on the field. It's vital they don't lose intensity. You can't expect to compete at 110% if you train at 70%.

'Strength and power can drop quickly, so you need conditioning sessions and you need to constantly monitor what players are doing. Especially with a squad-based event, some players may not have played for three or four games, but you could well be calling on them due to tactical changes or injury, so those guys may need extra sessions so that all players are at the same level of fitness.' And it's that individual approach to a team sport which is also vital to a coach's planning.

'The job of a coach is to build a team, conditioning players to their individual level,' adds Brewer. It is especially at the end of a long season, when some players may be carrying injuries, some may just have returned from injuries, others may be approaching the end of their careers and have more miles on the clock than an old Ford Cortina, that a coach needs to consider the good of the individuals as part of the overall strategy. 'When a player is older, they may fatigue quicker, so you would cut the volume and manage what they do. They will be carrying certain levels of fitness anyway, and it's the intensity you'd look at,' says Brewer.

Also vital for the coach is the communication to all players that what is being done is aimed at the best outcome, so that older or fitter players may not do as many laps of the track, but all understand why.

'At the top level, all players would understand the coach is doing what is best for the team, to bring every player to their optimum. There are no shirkers. While everyone naturally wants to do every session, they all accept the fact some will do different training,' states Brewer.

As football fans will know all too well this year, the small matter of a World Cup is looming, and that means a break after the regular season before the rigours of, ideally, a full month's campaign.

Again, Brewer says the conditioning coach must strike that balance: 'If you are going to a tournament where you're away as a group for maybe six weeks, then perhaps you don't want the players to be away from home for nine weeks – that's when you give them individual plans to maintain that fitness. You can't afford for them to de-condition.'

But once they are in the right physical condition, what then? Well, the good coach hasn't been sitting idly by. As Brewer says, mentally the players need to be 'at their zone of optimal functioning'.

'Some players need to relax, some need to be wound up. A coach needs to know his/her players. No one wants to do anything different in a final; it's still a pitch, they are still the same size goalposts etc. You need to build

routines which ensure they can follow the plan laid out, and confidence depends on how prepared they feel they are.'

It's this psychological aspect which Alan Olive, sports coach UK's High-Performance Coaching Manager, knows is just as vital. 'To me, an important point is the old SAS saying – "train hard, fight easy".'

'You must rehearse everything. When anyone says a final or major event is "just another game", well, we know that really they're lying aren't they!'

'Of course it's different, but we would always get people to practise in advance; for example, going to the venue itself to recreate the conditions.

You increase the pressure beforehand. I have a background in sailing and there you'd increase the pressure by going to a "process regatta", where one of the main reasons you are going is to try things out.

'You may use the World Championships to get things right and reproduce the stresses, so that when you are at the Olympic Games, for example, you are familiar with them.

'Again, using sailing as an example, before the Games they had a "home from home" in China and the team were comfortable there and with the conditions on and off the water. They took their own chef. That's obviously an extreme example,' says Olive.

According to Olive, preparation and planning are key: 'I know that in some sports teams just pitch up and compete, but if you haven't been there before then you are uncomfortable in those surroundings. When it comes to the actual performance, there are two types of performer. Some rise to the challenge, and the stress of a situation provides them with the impetus to perform better than normal, but that's not the case for most. The majority look for solace in the fact they are performing in a stressful and unfamiliar environment.

A successful team needs to reproduce the conditions they will face and train for the stresses.'

So how does the coach do it?

Olive doesn't say it's simple, but he does say the role is clear, and even during a game or match, the attitude a coach has can be vital for their players or athletes.

'A coach's job is to prepare the athlete and to control the controllables. They need to create a supportive structure around the athlete. A good coach minimises the stress and they need to be consistent. If they are normally calm and logical then they need to maintain that and still be calm and logical.

'Also, avoid tweaking. A lot try to tell players how to play while they are trying to play. Too many coaches do too much telling; players need to make their own decisions after being prepared properly,' he says.



Alan Olive's key points:

1 / Rehearse everything. It really isn't 'just another game' however much we may want to think it is.

2 / Use other events to get the technical details right, and become used to the surroundings if that's possible.

3 / Coaches should control the controllables and minimise the stress on the athlete or team.

4 / Be consistent. If you are behaving differently to normal, the team knows.

5 / Avoid tweaking, especially midway through an event.

This article is taken from issue 19 of *coaching edge* magazine. *coaching edge* is the subscription magazine of sports coach UK. Covering the latest methods and techniques, and featuring interviews with some of sport's leading figures, *coaching edge* is a must read. *coaching edge* subscription costs only £18 a year (£13.75 for students) and includes four issues of the magazine, plus special offers and discounts from 1st4sport.com

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