EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

SHARINGOALS

THE SYSTEMIC COACHING MANUAL
FOR FOOTBALL COACHES
AROUND THE WORLD

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1. EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

In football, much attention goes to what happens on the outside: the speed of a sprint, the precision of a pass, the positioning of the players, the physical intensity of a match. These things are visible and measurable, so they become the focus of coaching and analysis.

*"Mental training, through meditation, is **as important as physical training**."*

Raheem Sterling
England international,
four-time Premier League winner

Every action a player performs, however, is preceded by an internal process. Before a player attempts a difficult pass, reacts to a mistake or pushes through fatigue in training, something happens in their mind. Players constantly experience excitement, frustration, confidence, fear, pride, disappointment and joy, and these emotions shape how they behave, how they learn and how they perform.

Some players stay calm under pressure, recover quickly from mistakes and stay motivated after setbacks. Others struggle with frustration, lose focus or become discouraged when things do not work out immediately. The difference often lies not in technical ability or physical strength but in emotional competencies.

Research in sport psychology and human development has increasingly highlighted the role of psychological attributes in athlete development and performance. Motivation, resilience, emotional regulation, confidence and reflective learning are widely recognised as essential for long-term success in sport, and models of athlete development show that these attributes shape how athletes engage with training, respond to setbacks and turn learning experiences into better performance (Mills et al., 2023).

We share this view. In our experience, emotional competencies are not secondary qualities that develop automatically through participation in sport. They are the internal foundation on which individual performance is built.

In the Sharing Goals framework, emotional competencies therefore form the basis of individual development. While social competencies shape collective performance and team dynamics, emotional competencies determine how each player manages themselves. Together they form the human foundation of sustainable performance environments.

1.1. Emotional competencies in football

In developmental psychology, Saarni (1999) describes emotional competence as the ability to act effectively in situations that stir emotions: knowing what one feels, expressing and managing it in a way that fits the situation, and trusting one's own ability to handle it. In football, we describe emotional competencies as the abilities that allow players to understand themselves, regulate their emotions and sustain motivation throughout their development and performance.

"I used that to make me stronger."

Bukayo Saka, England, after scoring in the penalty shoot-out against Switzerland at Euro 2024, three years after missing the decisive penalty in the Euro 2020 final.

Few environments stir emotions as reliably as football. Players deal with pressure during matches, competition for places in the team, critical feedback from coaches and the highs and lows that come with victory and defeat. How they respond to these experiences shapes their development: players who read their own reactions and stay composed learn more from challenges and improve more consistently.

Research from several fields points in the same direction. In education, the Social and Emotional Learning framework developed by CASEL identifies self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making as the core areas of personal development and learning (CASEL, 2020).

In sport science, the Integrated Model of Talent Development (IMTD) grew out of research in elite youth football. It describes how development strengths such as perseverance, self-determination and adaptability interact with environment strengths such as involvement, opportunity and challenge to shape athletic potential (Mills et al., 2023). Optimal development environments deliberately support these psychological strengths alongside technical and physical abilities.

Research on mental toughness adds discipline, perseverance, self-belief and emotional control as the qualities that sustain performance under pressure (Gucciardi et al., 2015). And young football players themselves say the same: asked what supports their development, they name confidence, persistence, motivation and emotional control (Gražulis, 2013).

Taken together, these research traditions consistently point to three fundamental psychological processes: the ability to understand oneself, the ability to regulate emotions and behaviour, and the ability to sustain motivation towards meaningful goals. We have therefore organised the ten emotional competencies in the Sharing Goals framework into three interconnected domains: self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation & goal orientation.

1.2. Three domains, ten competencies

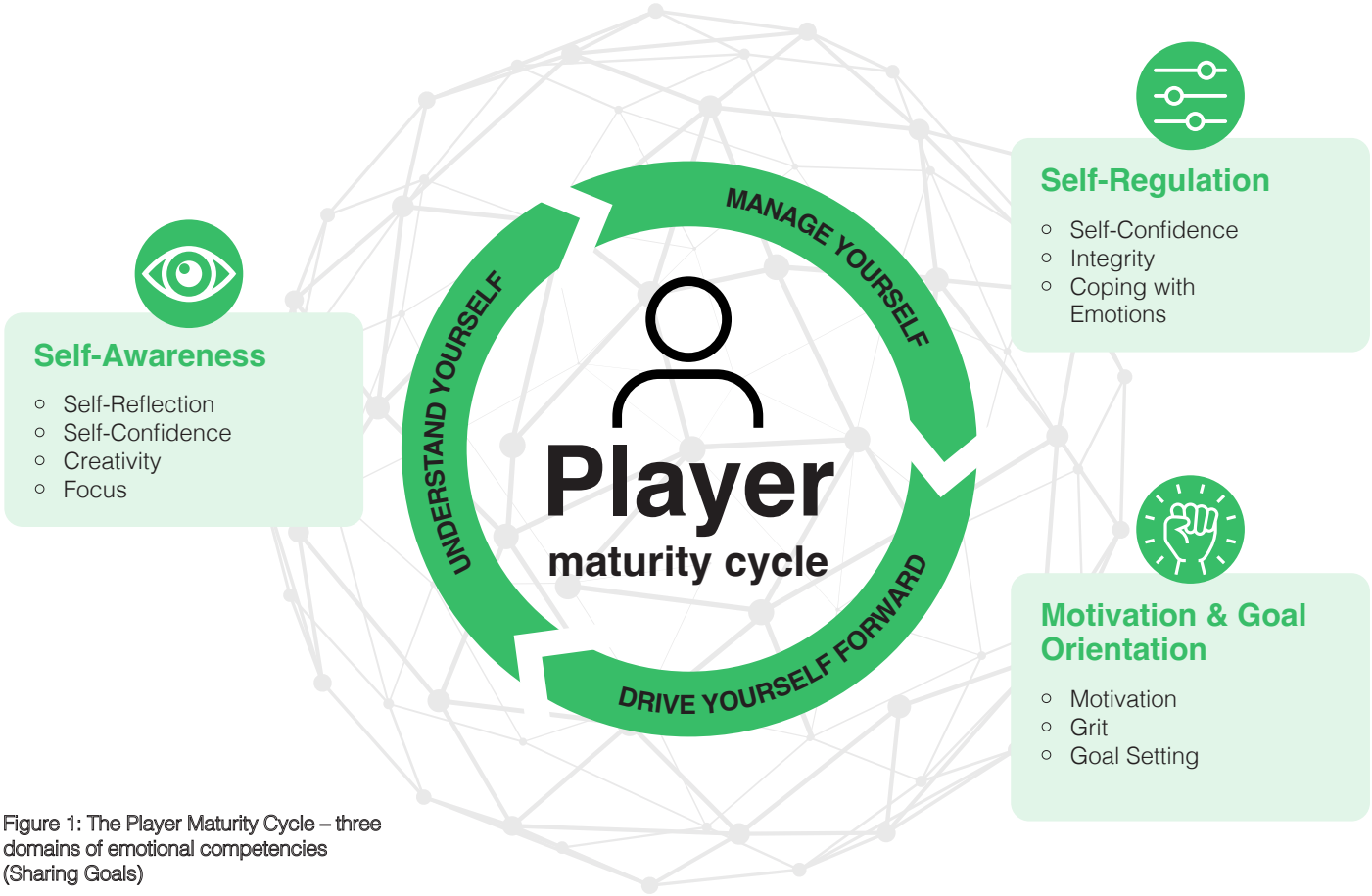

Figure 1: The Player Maturity Cycle – three domains of emotional competencies (Sharing Goals)

Self-awareness

Self-awareness is a player's ability to recognise their emotions, thoughts, strengths and weaknesses. It allows players to reflect on their experiences and understand how their mindset influences their performance. Players with strong self-awareness learn more from training, recognise what to improve and keep confidence in their abilities.

The following competencies contribute to self-awareness:

- Self-reflection
- Self-confidence
- Creativity
- Focus & mindfulness

These competencies help players understand themselves, their reactions and their learning process.

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to manage emotions, impulses and behaviour in demanding situations. Football provides them constantly, and the most familiar one plays out in almost every match: the referee makes a call, one team feels wronged, and players run to complain – often with full emotion and little respect – at the one person on the pitch who almost never reverses a decision. The energy spent arguing is energy lost for the next situation. Players with strong self-regulation feel the same disappointment; they let it go faster, channel it, and are ready when play resumes.

The following competencies contribute to self-regulation:

- Self-control
- Coping with emotions
- Responsibility & integrity

These competencies help players keep their emotional balance and meet challenges with maturity.

Motivation & goal orientation

Motivation & goal orientation describes the internal drive that sustains effort and supports long-term development. Progress in football takes persistence and continuous effort; improvement is gradual, and setbacks are part of learning. Players with strong motivation and perseverance stay committed to training and keep striving to improve.

The following competencies contribute to motivation & goal orientation:

- Motivation & passion
- Perseverance & determination
- Goal setting

Together, these competencies keep players engaged in their development over time.

How the domains connect

We order the three domains this way because they follow one another in practice. A player must first understand what they feel and how they react. They can then learn to regulate that reaction in demanding situations. And they need motivation and perseverance to keep working at it over time. Emotional development follows a simple progression:

understand yourself > manage yourself > drive yourself forward.

When the three domains develop together, players become more resilient, more reflective and better able to sustain a high level of performance. We call this the Player Maturity Cycle (Figure 1), the individual counterpart of the Team Maturity Cycle in the social competencies chapter. Within the Sharing Goals framework, emotional competencies are therefore the psychological foundation of individual player development: they shape how players approach training, how they respond to feedback and how effectively they apply their abilities in competition.

1.3. Emotional competencies and the Sharing Goals approach

Our story for this chapter comes from Germany, from the first coaching job of one of us.

I was eighteen and responsible for a U11 team in a small village. The best striker in the team was a joy to watch: quick, confident and in love with scoring. His father had made him an offer many parents would recognise: five euros for every goal. The boy took him at his word. He hunted goals in every game, and his pocket money grew with his tally.

Two years later I had moved to another city when the news reached me: he had stopped playing. His father had stopped paying for goals, and with the money gone, so was football.

I cannot know for certain what went on inside a boy of twelve, and children that age leave the game for many reasons. But everything I saw points in one direction. A village kid who had loved football for its own sake had learned, week by week, to play for a reward. His motivation had shifted from inside to outside, from the joy of scoring to the price of a goal. When the reward disappeared, there was nothing left underneath.

Psychology has a name for this: rewards tied to performance can crowd out the interest they were meant to encourage, and children are especially vulnerable (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999). Nobody in this story meant harm. The father wanted to support his son and reached for the tool he knew. There are many fathers like him, and mothers and coaches too, who mean well and never learn what they took away.

That is why we do not leave motivation to chance. In the Motivation & passion competency we work on how to nurture a player's own motivation and passion for the game in a natural and healthy way, and how to protect it from the well-meant pressures around young players.

We teach emotional competencies the way we teach passing or pressing: explicitly. Each of the ten competencies has its own activities, learning objectives and reflection questions for every age group from 7 to 18, and every session builds in moments in which players stop, look at what just happened and decide what they will do next time. Coaches model what they ask of the players: composure after a mistake, honesty about a weakness, effort when things are not going well.

Together with social competencies, emotional competencies form the human foundation that allows players to perform effectively both individually and collectively. When coaches deliberately support their development, players grow not only as athletes but as resilient, responsible and self-aware people who contribute positively to their teams, their families, their communities and society at large.

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Photos

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