EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

SELF-CONTROL

SHARINGOALS

THE SYSTEMIC COACHING MANUAL
FOR FOOTBALL COACHES
AROUND THE WORLD

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1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

"Natural talent only determines the limits of your athletic potential. It's dedication and a willingness to discipline your life that makes you great."
(Billie Jean King, former tennis player)

1.1. Scientific research

1.1.1. Definition

According to many international athletes, (self-) discipline and self-control are important determinants of not only a successful career but also a successful life. Before diving into the specifics of the relevance of these concepts, a definition is needed. While this section introduces on one hand the concept of discipline, and on the other hand of self-control or self-discipline, throughout this chapter, it will become clear that these concepts display overlaps and are interconnected in many aspects.

Discipline can be defined as one's ability to behave according to applicable rules or norms (Sunarti, 2004 in Adlya et al., 2020). Thereby, one's behaviour shows adherence, obedience, as well as orderliness to any rules, regulations and/or values that are existent in their respective community (Adlya et al., 2020). However, discipline may mean different things to different people or in different environments. In sports training it might mean working hard and when referring to one's lifestyle it may mean keeping away from bad influences (Morley et al., 2014). While the term discipline often evokes ideas of punishment, loud voices, or using power to control the behaviour of individuals that are subordinated, this is arguably only a small part of discipline as this chapter will later show.

On the other hand, self-control is seen as one of the central concepts of our psychological functioning as it helps people to adapt to their surrounding environment making self-control essential for reproduction and survival (Toering & Jordet, 2015). Self-control can be defined as the capacity to organise long-term goals, to recognise the costs and consequences of one's actions in the future, to monitor and identify attention and motivation changes and rectify them to align with the intended long-term goal (Hagger et al., 2021). In simpler terms, it is the capacity to keep control over impulsive responses or "the ability to regulate current thoughts, feelings, and behaviour to secure future benefits" (De Ridder et al., 2017).

Self-control is about the ability to forego small but immediate rewards in order to be able to achieve larger but delayed rewards (De Ridder et al., 2017). It is additionally useful to distinguish between self-control and self-regulation. While self-control happens consciously, self-regulation is an unconscious process. Self-control is an immediate way of dealing with a situation, for example keeping negative emotions in check after a negative performance. Self-regulation, on the other hand, is used in the longer term, for example staying intrinsically motivated to attend practice. However, both are argued to be equally important (Beckmann & Beckmann-Waldenmayer, 2020).

Case Study

The lives of Buddhist Monks show an example of how rigorous self-control can look like. Monastic traditions offer a familiar illustration: communities that live by a strict shared rule, in which breaking the rule carries a clear and understood consequence.

For a young football player, these rules may look a bit different, but still require self-control. In a team context, all players and coaches may sit down together and create a code of conduct, which outlines what the players should stick to if they want to be successful on the field.

One of these rules could include that, should a player be invited to a party the night before a match, the player should not go in order to be able to be in his best mental and physical condition on match day. This will require the player to say no to his friends, who invite him to a new party in town, although he would really like to go.

Many terms are put into connection with self-control, such as to exert control over, inhibit, or suppress emotions, impulses, temptations, improved performance regulation, well-learned responses and breaking habits (Hagger et al., 2021). Self-control can be divided into state self-control and trait self-control (Tedesqui & Young, 2017). Thereby, trait self-control refers to the differing capacities of self-control between individuals, while state self-control refers to the differing capacities of self-control within an individual across several situations (Boat et al., 2021). Hagger et al. (2021) argue that self-control and self-discipline are closely related to each other, while at times self-discipline and willpower are even used as synonyms for self-control.

1.1.2. Scientific Research and Models

Self-control has been studied for several decades, and the way researchers explain it has changed substantially in that time. Because the older explanation is still the one most often repeated in coaching literature, it is worth setting out both, and being clear about which parts of the evidence have held up.

The strength model

The dominant account for many years was the limited strength model, which holds that self-control draws on a single limited resource. Exerting self-control on one task was said to consume that resource, producing a state called ego depletion in which a second, unrelated act of self-control is more likely to fail (De Ridder, Adriaanse & Fujita, 2017). This is the model behind the battery analogy shown in Figures 1 and 2: capacity drains through the day, and training is said to enlarge the battery.

Why the strength model is no longer accepted as it stands

The depletion effect has not survived rigorous testing. A series of meta-analytic tests that corrected for small-study effects and publication bias found very little evidence that the depletion effect is a real phenomenon, at least as it is usually measured in the laboratory (Carter et al., 2015). A preregistered replication was then run across 23 laboratories with a combined sample of 2,141 participants; the pooled effect was d = 0.04, with a confidence interval that included zero — a null result, against an effect of d = 0.69 in the study being replicated (Hagger et al., 2016).

The finding is disputed. Baumeister and Vohs, who developed the original model, argued that the task used in the replication was not an effective way of producing depletion (Baumeister & Vohs, 2016). The debate is therefore not formally closed. But no coach should plan a session on the assumption that self-control is a fuel tank that empties, because the best available evidence does not support it.

The process model

The main alternative explains the same observations without a resource. On this account, exerting self-control at one moment produces temporary shifts in motivation and attention — away from restraint and towards reward — which make a second act of self-control less likely rather than less possible (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012). This fits an observation the strength model struggles with: the apparent decline disappears when the second task is made worthwhile, for instance by incentivising it (Englert et al., 2021). A player who stops trying is usually a player whose priorities have shifted, not one who has run out of something.

What is not in doubt

The controversy concerns the short-term depletion effect only. It does not touch the evidence that self-control as a stable individual characteristic matters, which rests on a separate and much more robust body of work. A meta-analysis of 102 studies with a combined sample of 32,648 participants found a small to medium positive effect of trait self-control on behaviour across a wide range of domains (De Ridder et al., 2012). That evidence is unaffected by the depletion debate, and it is the evidence this framework is built on.

For coaching, the practical consequence is a change of emphasis rather than a change of aim. Self-control is still worth developing, and can still be developed. But it should be treated as a skill that is learned and supported by conditions, not as a fuel to be rationed — so the coach's attention belongs on why a player wants to hold the standard and on what is competing for their attention, rather than on how much willpower they have supposedly spent.

While researchers agree about the positive effects of self-control, differences become apparent as to how self-control is conceptualised and measured as this section highlights. Additionally, existing research does not agree whether self-control consists of one or multiple domains. Many theorists believe that self-control solely shows two behaviours, either impulsive or reflective behaviour (Hagger et al., 2021). Therefore, researchers make use of differing ways to measure self-control in their research participants. However, this chapter is not concerned about the ways of measurement, but rather the findings and practical implications resulting from these findings.

Researchers agree about the fact that self-control requires effort and produces costs (Englert et al., 2021). However, several theoretical models on self-control are prevalent among psychological researchers. One of the most popular ones is the limited strength model which assumes that self-control is limited and that exerting self-control in one task leads to the depletion of the ability to exert it in a subsequent task (De Ridder et al., 2017). In simpler terms, it reduces one's capacity to exert self-control (Englert et al., 2021). For example, athletes that are asked to do their homework prior to a training session perform worse in their session than those that played videogames prior to their training session.

Another famous, but opposing, theoretical model assumes that rather than reducing one's capacity, one's willingness to apply self-control is reduced (Englert et al., 2021). While this section focuses on these two theoretical approaches; the strength model and the shifting priorities model (or 'Process Model of Depletion'), other relevant theoretical models on self-control include proactive and reactive processes in self-control, self-control as the regulation of cue-based responses, and effortless self-control processes (De Ridder et al., 2017).

The limited strength model has been the prevalent model on explaining self-control for many years (Milyavskaya & Inzlicht, 2017). The model assumes that self-control is a limited resource and by exerting self-control, its capacity is being consumed resulting in a state called ego depletion. When in this state, further attempts to exert self-control will fail. When an individual engages in an activity that requires self-control at time 1, their performance usually tends to decline on a different task at time 2 (Inzlicht et al., 2013). This idea is displayed in Figure 1 using a battery analogy; because self-control is exerted throughout the day, the ability to use it declines. However, the model suggests that through training the capacity of the battery can be increased, as shown in Figure 2.

Nevertheless, the model has been increasingly challenged because it has not been proven beyond a doubt and proves to show multiple conceptual and logical problems (Inzlicht et al., 2013; Milyavskaya & Inzlicht, 2017). It might just be that one is not willing to exert self-control on a subsequent task than cannot exert it, as it was found that the effects of reduced self-control are offset when the subsequent task is for instance incentivized with money (Englert et al., 2021).

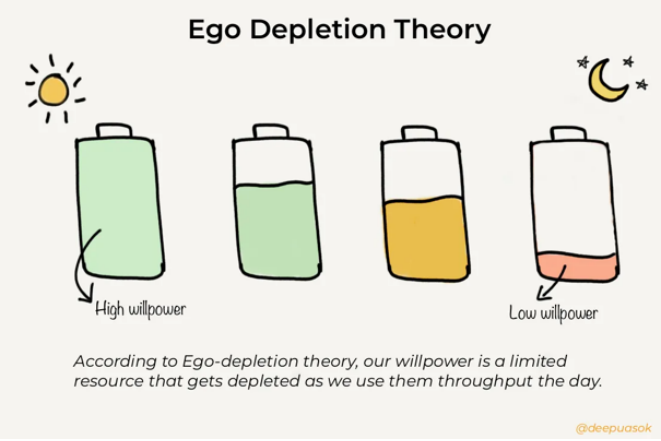


Figure 1 : Ego Depletion Theory, own illustration

The battery analogy in Figures 1 and 2 illustrates the strength model as it was originally proposed. It is included here because it is still widely used in coaching literature, but as the evidence set out above shows, it should be read as a historical account rather than as a current description of how self-control works.

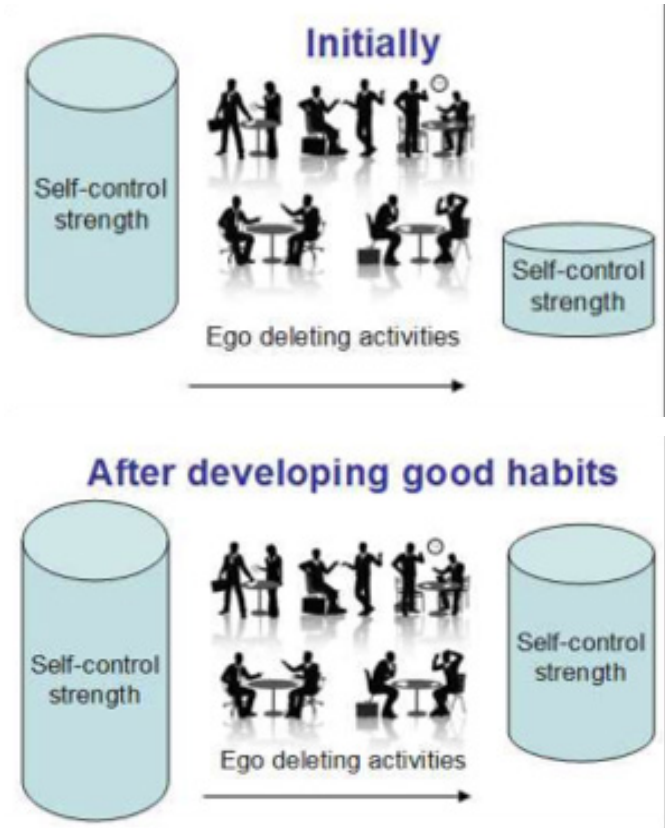


Figure 2: Change in Self-Control Capacity, Source: Oades, 2010

To address these problems, Milyavskaya & Inzlicht (2017) suggest the Shifting Priorities Model of Self-control (or 'Process Model of Depletion'; see Figure 1). This model shifts the view of self-control as 'good' and therefore indulgence as 'bad'. Consequently, the view of what is the 'right' or 'good' decision has changed. These changes in value given to specific behaviours are explained by a shift in motivation; 'ego depletion' may therefore be when these shifts occur.

For self-control to be applied, a case has to be apparent in which indulgences and long-term goals have a similar value, otherwise a decision is made without conflict nor effort. In this model, motivation is understood as the factor that shifts the value that is given to each indulgence or choice, whereby motivation can be created through external or internal incentives, societal pressures, or unmet needs. The authors propose that initially control needed to be applied to 'have-to' goals, such as having to do one's homework to get a good education, which leads to a shift towards 'want-to' goals, wanting to stay at home and not go to training.

Case Study

The limited strength model assumes that, because doing homework requires an athlete to exert self-control, their ability to exert more self-control afterwards declines, hence their performance in the next training session will decline.

A player that spent two hours on his mathematics homework may find himself at training, where his coach requires him to do sprints with full recovery time. He might try to cut his recovery time short to sprint again, just to get it over and done with. When the player continuously practices his self-control, he will be able to increase his performance. The same player had to work again for two hours on his mathematics homework, but he is able to complete the sprints at training and keeps to the full recovery time.

It needs to be noted, however, that some 'want-to' goals may feel like 'have-to' goals, for instance losing weight, because they are connected to a sense of duty; this may be the case for many athletes.

When Inzlicht et al. (2013) suggest a shift of motivation from 'have-to' to 'want-to' goals, they mean that individuals, after having applied self-control, may prefer activities they find enjoyable over those they have to do due to external pressures. In contrast to the limited strength model, it is not about individuals not being able to control themselves anymore, but about them not feeling like controlling themselves but rather preferring to pursue enjoyable goals, such as staying at home on the couch to watch TV instead of going to training.

Nevertheless, there are some exceptions; participants that are rewarded for their self-control for the time 1 task, those that enjoy their time 1 task, or are motivated to engage in the time 2 task do not experience depletion. Finally, as shown in Figure 1 below, it is suggested that shifts in motivation are accompanied by shifts in attention and emotion, hence, reduced motivation for 'have-to' tasks also leads to reduced emotion and attention to 'have-to' tasks (Inzlicht et al., 2013).

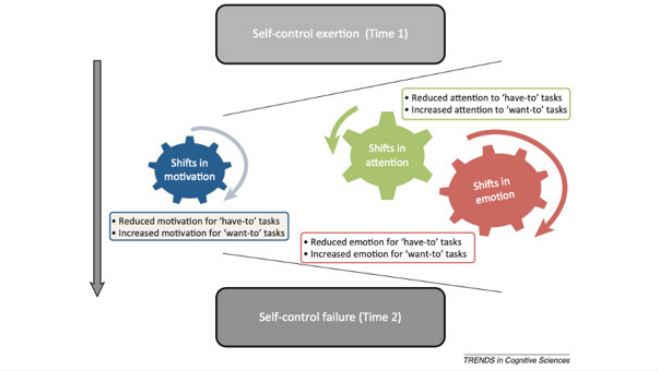


Figure 3 : The Shifting Priorities Model (Inzlicht et al., 2013)

While both models, the limited strength model and the shifting priorities model assume different reasons to be prevailing in ego depletion, it is clear that it is increasingly difficult to exert self-control in a second task after having exerted it in a previous task. The following section introduces the importance of self-control and discipline in sports and football in particular before the information from these sections is used to suggest ways to practice self-control in football.

Case Study

The Shifting Priorities Model shifts the view of what is seen as good and what is seen as bad. Take for example a football player who does two hours of difficult homework prior to his training session. If he considers his homework incompatible with his long-term goal of becoming a football player, it will require a lot of controlling himself to sit down and do his homework prior to his training session. Because doing homework feels like something he needs to do, he will afterwards tend to do something that he wants to do. This may look like staying at home and playing PlayStation instead of going to training. However, these long-term goals can change over time. He might start feeling like he wants to get his degree in order to have a valuable backup option for after his professional football career. Now his difficult homework will become something he wants to do and going to training is also something he wants to do, as he would like to become a professional football player. He is, therefore, more likely to go to training after his homework as both activities do not feel like something he has to do but wants to do.

1.1.3. Impact on performance

Self-control is consistently associated with the behaviours that separate players who progress from those who do not. In professional football, players scoring higher in self-control reported more self-regulated approaches to their own learning and development (Toering & Jordet, 2015). Across sports more broadly, self-control is associated with engagement in the kind of effortful practice that builds skill, and with the level ultimately reached (Tedesqui & Young, 2017).

The mechanism is mostly indirect and accumulates over long periods. Self-control does not make a pass more accurate on the day. It determines whether a player attends the session they do not feel like attending, keeps their shape in the eightieth minute, holds a defensive position instead of following the ball, and repeats a technical correction long enough for it to become automatic. Over a season these decisions compound into a visible difference in level.

There is also a short-term literature on prior exertion and subsequent sporting performance, in which some studies report a decline (Boat, Sunderland & Cooper, 2021; Englert, 2017). These findings should be read in the light of the replication problems set out above; the effect, if it exists, is smaller and less reliable than early work suggested. What is clear is that fatigue, low motivation and competing attentional demands all degrade the behaviours self-control supports, and that all three are within the coach's power to influence through session design.

Self-control and self-discipline are arguably relevant for one's health and success in life in general, however, the skills are of similar relevance for athletes in general and those active in football. Especially for engagement in regular physical activity, both state and trait self-control are of importance (Englert, 2017). An athlete is required to train consistently over many years to reach a high level, and self-control is associated with engagement in exactly that kind of sustained practice (Tedesqui & Young, 2017). Furthermore, being active in professional sports can be demanding and athletes are especially prone to self-control exhaustion which can be a risk for further conditions such as athlete burnout (Jordalen et al., 2018).

A study conducted by Ulyanova & Chernykh (2019) found a strong correlation between athletes' success on the field and their determination, self-control, autonomy and persistence.

When speaking about self-control in football, the concept's importance can be split up into its importance for the consistency and commitment to training, as well as the performance on the field. However, Englert (2017) splits up the contexts in which athletes need to exert self-control into three; having to control emotions during games or competitions, having to concentrate in high-pressure environments, and resisting immediate temptations to be able to achieve long-term goals. Especially when considering the professional football setting, it is almost impossible to identify those players that are going to be future top players, at an early age. Therefore, it is arguably more relevant to see a player's expertise development for which self-control is of high importance (Toering & Jordet, 2015).

Expertise development can take place through continuously engaging in training. However, in order to continuously engage in training, athletes often have to sustain motivational barriers and overcome short-term pleasures and delay their gratification. For instance, they may have to resist an invitation from friends to attend a training session (Tedesqui & Young, 2017; Englert, 2017). A study on self-control (Toering & Jordet, 2015) found that impulse control, which forms part of self-control, was significant in the choice of players for the Norwegian football national team.

Furthermore, athletes are required to perform complex and skill-based tasks specific to their sport during which they need to stay in control of their motor, emotional, and cognitive processes (Boat et al., 2021). Those athletes that are strong in self-control and self-discipline tend to build better habits, sustain attention, procrastinate less and progress towards mastery more quickly (De Ridder et al., 2012; Tedesqui & Young, 2017). Athletes also arguably need self-control to regulate their anxiety to be able to focus on the task or exercise at hand (Englert, 2016). This also includes the ability to navigate negative emotions and suppress these after failure (Beckmann & Beckmann-Waldenmayer, 2020).

A study conducted by Toering & Jordet (2015) aimed to investigate self-control in professional football players including the association between self-control and performance. Their results show a relationship between self-control, daily activities and performance. It was found that professional football players seem to understand self-control in a different way than the regular population and, additionally, show higher self-control scores. Those players that scored higher on restraint and impulse control tend to spend more time on practice, sleep, and homework and less on social and play activities.

However, it needs to be emphasised that social and play activities are not necessarily a destructive distraction but can play a functional role for recovery. Nevertheless, self-control, specifically impulse control, was found to be relevant for making it to the national team – the higher the impulse control score in the players was, the more likely they were to have experience playing for the national team. Finally, self-control was found to support individuals in being more capable of tolerating difficult periods during their professional football career, such as recovering from injuries (Toering & Jordet, 2015). Consequently, it becomes evident that self-control plays a big role in an athlete's and player's success on the field by being linked directly to their performance, their consistency in training, as well as having a healthy lifestyle.

Discipline is found to be additionally important in sports, to both players and coaches (Morley et al., 2014). According to Merino (2021), discipline forms the backbone of a sports team's identity and leads to the athletes putting the common good over their own. However, when obedience and discipline prevail, the autonomy of the athletes may be lost, as well as their capacity to make decisions and their creativity (Merino, 2021).

A study by Morgan (2006) found that any behaviours aiming at keeping control, such as disciplining, maintaining order, and punishment-oriented feedback, negatively influenced the attitudes athletes had towards their coaches. The findings of a different study on discipline at a school football team show that a high amount of discipline prevalent additionally reduces the available space for peer learning. Team discipline is not only understood as following the rules of the game of football, but also taking care of materials, being on time for training sessions or meetings, etc. (Merino, 2021).

This section has shown the importance of self-control in sports and football. While self-control was found to display manifold advantages, discipline needs to be exercised with caution. Discipline is of importance for football players and the team as a whole but if the level of discipline is too high, it can become destructive.

Differences between positions

Although few researchers have focused on self-control in connection with specific positions in football, Turovsky et al. (2013) found slight differences between some positions. Their results show that defenders and forwards show lower self-control scores than midfielders suggesting a higher relevance of self-control for those playing in the midfield. However, the results are ambiguous as the study additionally found that midfielders and forwards show higher anxiety and aggression scores suggesting an increased relevance for those positions (Turovsky et al., 2013).

1.1.4. Impact on social cohesion

Self-control is usually described as an individual attribute, but most of what it produces in a squad is visible only between players. Trait self-control predicts better interpersonal relationships as well as individual outcomes (De Ridder et al., 2012), and in a football team the everyday form of this is reliability: arriving prepared, holding a role that is not personally rewarding, and absorbing a provocation without retaliating.

The reverse is equally visible. A player who reacts to every decision, argues with team-mates after mistakes, or abandons a defensive task when frustrated imposes a cost on ten other people. Discipline in the sense of behaving according to agreed rules is what makes a group predictable enough to rely on, and youth football research consistently identifies clear expectations, consistently applied, as a feature of well-functioning academy environments (Morley et al., 2014).

Coaches contribute to this directly through the standards they set and hold. Setting clear boundaries early, and applying them consistently rather than severely, is a recurring recommendation in guidance on positive discipline for young athletes (Rutgers Youth Sports Research Council, n.d.). It is worth noting that the specific link between individual self-control and measured team cohesion has been less directly studied than the individual outcomes, so this section should be read as a reasonable inference from adjacent evidence rather than as a directly tested finding.

1.1.5. Correlations with private and family life, academic and work career

The evidence that self-control in childhood matters for adult life is among the strongest in this entire framework. A cohort of 1,000 children was followed from birth to the age of 32; childhood self-control predicted physical health, substance dependence, personal finances and criminal offending in adulthood, following a gradient — at every point on the distribution, more self-control predicted better outcomes. The effects held after accounting for intelligence and social class, and were confirmed within a separate cohort of 500 sibling pairs, where the sibling with lower self-control had poorer outcomes despite a shared family background (Moffitt et al., 2011).

The finding matters for coaches because it is a gradient rather than a threshold. There is no cut-off below which a child is written off and above which the work is finished; improvement anywhere on the scale is associated with better outcomes. A player in the middle of a squad has as much to gain as one at either end.

In education, self-control is associated with academic outcomes and with the discipline students show at school (Duckworth, Gendler & Gross, 2014; Adlya, Yusuf & Effendi, 2020), and higher trait self-control is associated with better emotional and psychological functioning in daily life (Daly et al., 2014). Football is one of the few settings where a young person voluntarily practises delayed gratification several times a week, which places coaches in an unusually strong position to affect a trajectory that extends well beyond the pitch.

After having defined discipline and self-control, this section turns to the importance of the concepts for an individual's life before understanding their importance for an athlete's life in particular. High levels of self-control are argued to be of positive influence for children and for adults. Children that can control themselves often become healthier adults than those that show low levels in self-control (Daly et al., 2014). Generally, high self-control is found to be linked to the ability to control and stabilize emotions; thereby, the higher one's self-control, the higher one's emotional stability.

Furthermore, individuals with higher self-control experience more positive emotions overall (Daly et al., 2014). Self-control is additionally of relevance for goal pursuit as it helps to commit to goals that are feasible as well as desirable, and it helps to get started and stay on track even when hindrances are faced. It enables one to be considerate of one's resources and finally, self-control helps to disengage once goal achievement becomes unlikely (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2017).

Good self-control further leads to improved performance at school, university, or at work. It arguably improves social relationships, decreases susceptibility to crime and drug abuse, contributes to higher self-esteem, decreases anxiety and depression, and leads to less aggressive behaviour (Hagger et al., 2021; De Ridder et al., 2017). While much research focuses on the psychological effects of self-control, some researchers additionally found biological effects of high levels of self-control. These include a slower heart rate, an increased rate of decline in cortisol throughout the day, and an increased variability in heart rate (Daly et al., 2014).

The manifold positive effects of self-control show that high levels of self-control lead to a general improved mental and physical health of individuals (Hagger et al., 2021). While high levels of self-control can have many benefits, low levels of self-control can have especially detrimental effects on an individual. According to Adlya et al. (2020), low levels of self-control can lead to one's inability to guide and manage one's behaviour, or more specifically, the inability to control an arising stimulus, to consider the consequences of specific actions, and to finally choose the right action. Additionally, low self-control can limit the ability to stay focused on a task, or to pursue a goal. Research links inadequate self-control to several behaviours, such as smoking, drinking, substance abuse, sexually impulsive behaviour, overeating or procrastination (Daly et al., 2014; De Ridder et al., 2017). Self-control failure can ultimately lead to the violation of societal or personal standards which can lead to feelings of guilt, regret or even result in interpersonal conflicts (Daly et al., 2014).

After having introduced the concepts of discipline and self-control and defined their importance generally, the following section introduces several theoretical approaches and models in the field.

1.1.6. Development of self-control

Self-control develops gradually across childhood and adolescence, and the ways it can be supported change as it does. Strategies for regulating impulses that are established early tend to be more effective later in life, which is a strong argument for starting young; equally, self-control remains trainable well beyond childhood, so no age group is too late to work with (Duckworth, Gendler & Gross, 2014).

The demands change faster than the capacity. Younger children can hold a rule for a short, clearly framed task, but not across a long session or in the face of strong competing impulses. Adolescents can hold a standard over much longer periods, but face far stronger competition for their attention — peers, status, and the visibility of their own performance. This is why the same instruction produces different results at different ages: the limiting factor at Stage 1 is understanding and remembering the rule, while at Stage 5 it is usually motivation and social cost.

Deliberate practice does help. A meta-analysis of self-control training studies found that practice improves self-control (Beames, Schofield & Denson, 2017), although the size and durability of such effects are debated in the same way as the depletion literature. In youth sport the more reliable route is not isolated willpower drills but repeated, structured exposure to situations that require restraint in a context the player cares about — which is a description of well-designed football training. Self-control is also related to motivation over time: athletes with stronger self-regulation show different exhaustion trajectories across a season (Jordalen et al., 2018), which is a reminder that pushing restraint without attending to motivation is counterproductive.

Methods for building self-control

As the theoretical section above has shown, researchers in the field do not agree on one model or conceptualisation that describes self-control and there have been few sports-specific self-control interventions that have taken place yet (Englert, 2017). Therefore, there is no one ideal way of teaching or coaching self-control but multiple differing ideas and approaches. Some studies report that athletes who have just completed a task requiring self-control then perform worse in a sports-related task under pressure, which has led some authors to recommend avoiding mentally demanding tasks immediately before a session or a game. As set out in the models section above, these short-term findings have not replicated reliably and should be treated with caution.

What is clearer is that any such effect is not uniform: mental exhaustion is associated with reduced endurance, decision-making and motor skill, but not with reduced maximal force production (Englert et al., 2021).

Athletes are required to exert self-control across their training, before, during, and after a game, and in their routines. More specifically, showing up to training consistently requires self-control, during a game an athlete needs to control their mindset, and routines like eating require self-control. According to Oaten & Cheng (2006 in Daly et al., 2014) and Englert (2017), self-control is a skill that can be practiced.

While this assumption stems from the limited strength model, it is supported by Beames et al. (2017) who argue that practising self-control can improve health and well-being. The authors introduce two approaches on how to improve self-control. Training the specific executive function is one approach that was found to improve self-control. Participants were asked to perform the stroop task and floss their teeth afterwards. The stroop task gives the participants incongruent information where names of colours are printed in a different ink than the colour named. Participants consequently may have to read the named colour or the colour of the ink.

The experiment showed that increased practice was found to increase tooth flossing in the participants. The second approach the authors suggest includes self-control training where a task that requires self-control is carried out over a specific amount of time, for instance two weeks. The task performed needs to require the participant to replace an impulse with a preferred action (Beames et al., 2017). This can be a simple exercise, such as instructing the players to brush their teeth with their weaker hand instead of their stronger hand or using a hand gripper for a specific amount of time.

Interestingly, Hagger et al. (2021) believe that those individuals with high levels of self-control actually have to exert less self-control than those with lower levels of self-control, hence suggesting that self-controlled individuals have the ability to create environments in which temptations are avoided. The shifting priorities model suggests similar approaches to exert more self-control. One way that is suggested is to add extrinsic or rewards of interpersonal nature to shift motivation to the desired choice. Furthermore, 'want-to' motivation can be increased by setting goals that are in proximity to one's identity, or making the desired, self-control choice more enjoyable. The latter option is more sustainable as it is not based on extrinsic rewards.

It is additionally possible to decrease the value of the tempting choice, such as a swear jar or a jar for latecomers to training sessions. Research has also found that it increases self-control when individuals are encouraged to think of the reasons rather than the means with which they are pursuing their goals (Milyavskaya & Inzlicht, 2017). Specific ways to improve self-control are arguably the setting of goals, monitoring of feedback between the current behaviour and achievement of the goals, and an implementation of the behaviour that is intended to achieve the goal (Beames et al., 2017).

Englert (2017), as well as Oettingen & Gollwitzer (2017), further introduce the use of implementation intentions (II) where a cognitive association between a situation and an intention is created through the planning of how a self-control problem in the future will be dealt with. This could for instance be: "Whenever I am on the couch before a training session and I start getting tired, I get up and put on my training kit.". Therefore, it is of importance to define where, when, and how the action is to be taken. Implementation intentions are especially useful when starting a routine, as well as staying on track with a routine. Finally, the action will be automatic, efficient, immediate, and no longer need an active intent to be carried out (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2017).

Oettingen & Gollwitzer (2017) further suggest mental contrasting (MC) as a way to overcome self-control problems and argue that this method can start and sustain behaviour change. An individual is to first imagine their desired future, then identify the obstacle which is hindering the achievement of the desired future. These imaginations activate expectations of reaching the desired future which helps overcome the self-control struggle. Research has found this method to not only be useful for the specific situation it is applied to but for other behaviours beyond. Finally, combining implementation intentions and mental contrasting (MCII) may be even more effective as it was found to promote long-term behaviour change and improve individuals' time management (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2017).

Structured self-talk is a further method with direct application in training. The athlete first identifies which internal conversations hinder them and which support them, then restructures the unhelpful ones and practises the result as part of training. Motivational self-talk is used before a game and instructional self-talk during it (Beckmann & Beckmann-Waldenmayer, 2020). Routines before and after a game, combining cognitive and physical elements, serve the same purpose of making the desired behaviour automatic rather than effortful.

Some research further suggests the use of mindfulness practices as these are argued to decrease stress and lead to individuals accepting their thoughts, hence being able to perform a task even if they are not willing to exert self-control (Friese et al., 2012). Beckmann & Beckmann-Waldenmayer, (2020) argue that mindfulness can help create a healthy balance between physical strain and recovery. However, mindfulness has not yet been studied beyond in relation to self-control (Englert, 2017). Additional research suggests the use of embodiment as a way to stay in self-control; for example, pushing the chest out even after having lost a game. Other exercises introduced include using music as a self-regulation strategy (Beckmann & Beckmann-Waldenmayer, 2020).

Existing research does not set out football-specific exercises for developing self-control, which is why the exercises in the Training chapter of this document have been designed for the purpose rather than drawn from the literature.

These differing ideas on how to coach self-control are summarised in Table 1. It is suggested that an ideal training plan makes use of a variety of approaches, which can later be evaluated and adapted as success is observed.

Learning approach	Description	Researcher
Training specific Executive Function	Continuous training of desired task following a self-control task	Beames et al., 2017
Self-Control Training	Continuous training of the specific action that requires self-control; over a two week period	Beames et al., 2017
Shifting the Motivation	Adding extrinsic rewards to desired task; Adding intrinsic reward to desired task such as setting goals; Decrease value of undesired task such as introducing a jar for latecomers	Milyavskaya & Inzlicht, 2017
Implementation Intentions (II)	Creation of cognitive association; “Whenever I am on the couch before a training session and I start getting tired, I get up and put on my training kit”	Englert, 2017, Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2017
Mental Contrasting (MC)	Imagination of desired future and subsequently identifying of the obstacle hindering the achievement	Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2017
Mindfulness Practices	Can include meditation but also specific football practices encouraging mindfulness (see Chapter on Concentration, Focus, and Mindfulness)	Toering & Jordet, 2015
Concentration Exercises	Incorporation of specific targets	Own suggestions based on literature
Pressure Situations	Those situations in which players have to practice keeping composure and regulating anxiety (e.g. penalty shoot outs)	Own suggestions based on literature
Game Simulations	Creation of unpredictable situations	Own suggestions based on literature

Table 1 : Approaches to practice Self-Control (own illustration)

1.2. Window of opportunities

A window of opportunity describes a period in development when a competence, or the components underlying it, develops disproportionately faster than at other times. For self-control the case is less a narrow window than a long head start: strategies for regulating impulses are argued to be most effective when developed in the earliest stages, which is part of why older individuals are generally more self-controlled than younger ones (Duckworth et al., 2014).

That head start is not a deadline. Self-control can continue to be trained well beyond childhood and can still strengthen in late adulthood, so a player who arrives at fifteen with little of it has not missed their chance (Duckworth et al., 2014). What early practice buys is accumulated repetition rather than exclusivity.

Football shows the same pattern. Self-control and self-discipline are argued to play a key role throughout childhood and adolescence, and to matter most in the early stages of training, before interest and motivation in the sport become self-sustaining. Their weight varies with the age of the athlete, the demands of the sport and the objectives of the session, but self-control training can have large effects early in a young athlete's development (Ulyanova & Chernykh, 2019).

At Stages 1 and 2 the first requirement is an environment players want to return to. Motivation is not yet self-sustaining, so short self-control tasks work when they are enjoyable or followed by a reward. Cognitive self-control improves noticeably between nine and ten, which makes deliberate exercises possible, but the balance matters: too much restraint at these ages can come at the cost of creativity.

At Stages 3 and 4 the driver shifts from enjoyment to belonging. Players spend more time with peers and care more about those friendships, and self-control becomes relevant not only to staying focused in football but to what happens away from it. Growing self-awareness makes feedback sessions useful for the first time, and at Stage 4 goal setting gives restraint something concrete to serve.

At Stages 5 and 6 decision-making improves while exposure to risk outside football rises. Self-control work extends to before, during and after games, and to behaviour on and off the field. By Stage 6 interest in the sport is usually self-sustaining, and the useful focus narrows to sport-specific pressure and anxiety rather than to conduct away from the pitch.

Self-control therefore warrants attention at every stage, with the emphasis moving from short enjoyable tasks in the early stages, through feedback and goal setting in the middle ones, to pressure situations at the end.

1.3. Correlation with other skills and competencies



Self-Control connects to the competences below wherever a player has to not do what feels most urgent.

Correlation with Emotional Competencies
Coping with Emotions is where most self-control is spent, because what a player holds back is usually an emotion before it is an action. Goal Setting gives restraint something to serve, as a player with a goal has a reason not to do what feels most urgent. Focus & Mindfulness come first, because an impulse can only be held back once it has been noticed.

Correlation with Physical Skills
Endurance is decided outside the session, as sleep, recovery and conditioning are choices made when nobody is watching. Strength work is repetition through discomfort, which is restraint applied physically.

Correlation with Technical Abilities
Dribbling & Feinting depend on self-control as much as on skill, because knowing when not to dribble is a decision taken inside the action. Passing the simple ball when the spectacular one is available is restraint in its most visible form.

Correlation with Social Competencies
Conflict Management begins in the second before a player reacts, which is where self-control does its work. Communication includes the choice not to answer a provocation, as silence under pressure is also a message. Leadership suffers when composure goes, because a player who loses it takes the group's composure with them.

Correlation with Cognitive Skills
Quick Decision Making improves with self-control, as it creates the pause in which a better option can be chosen. Critical Thinking makes restraint deliberate, because weighing consequences before acting turns a reflex into a choice.

Correlation with Tactical Principles
Concentration is the tactical principle most dependent on self-control, as closing the danger zone in numbers only works while every player fulfills their role. Delay means not doing what feels most urgent, as the defender holds off the challenge until support arrives. Defensive Cover is sustained restraint, because holding a covering position while the ball is elsewhere means staying out of the action.

1.4. Key learnings

- Discipline describes one's ability to behave according to applicable rules or norms (stage 2-6)
- Discipline is of importance in balanced amounts (stage 2-6)
- Self-control describes the capacity to keep control over impulsive responses in order to achieve long-term goals (stage 3-6)
- High levels of self-control positively contribute to one's overall mental and physical health, for instance through emotional regulation (stage 1-6) and reduced drug abuse (stage 4-6)
- Good self-control further leads to improved performance at school, university, or at work (stage 1-6)
- Early research claimed that exerting self-control on one task reduces it on the next; large replication studies have not supported this, and self-control is better understood as a skill shaped by motivation and attention than as a limited fuel (stage 4-6)
- Self-control for football players is of importance on and off the field; in terms of commitment to continuous training and the ability to show their best self on the field (stage 3-6)
- Self-control is not always easy to apply but can be improved through practice (stage 3-6)
- The right balance of (self-)discipline is required: too much can reduce the players capacity to make decisions and their creativity (stage 3-6)
- While self-control is of big importance for children, it does not lose its relevance throughout an athlete's life: life-long learning possible (stage 1-6)
- Implementation Intentions includes the planning of how a self-control problem in the future will be dealt with to create automatic responses (stage 5-6)
- Mental Contrasting: a way to overcome self-control problems which promotes long-term behaviour change and improves one's time management (stage 5-6)
- Practices can further include finding one's own motivation or practising saying no to things (stage 3-6)
- Football-specific ways to improve self-control include concentration exercises, pressure exercises, game simulations, goal setting sessions, and motivation and mindfulness practices (stage 1-6)

1.5. From science to practice

Self-control is best developed as a learned skill practised in situations the player is invested in, supported by clear expectations and genuine motivation. What changes across the six stages is the time a player can hold a standard, the complexity of what they are holding it for, and how much of the structure the coach has to supply.

Stage 1
7-8 years



One rule, stop and wait, enjoyment

Self-control is exercised in short bursts around one clear rule. Children can follow instructions for brief tasks, but not consistently across a session. Coaches provide structure through one instruction at a time, immediate feedback, and games where stopping, waiting, or holding still are part of the activity.

Motivation is not yet self-sustaining, so activities should be engaging and repeatable. Consistent rules create predictability and help play run smoothly as children learn when to stop and go.

Stage 2
9-10 years



Noticing the impulse, naming it, cues from the coach

Players can hold a rule across an activity and begin to notice when they have broken it. Cognitive self-control improves between nine and ten, making deliberate exercises possible: recognising the moment of impulse, such as a tackle, argument, or poor shot, and naming it afterwards with the coach's cue. Enjoyment remains the main driver, and too much restraint costs creativity, so short tasks within games work best.

A team where players can acknowledge impulsive actions without punishment argues less, recovers faster after mistakes, and maintains its organisation longer.

Stage 3
11-12 years



Purpose, own decisions, belonging

Players can connect self-control to what they want. Belonging becomes a strong driver, while growing self-awareness makes feedback more useful. Restraint is linked to a chosen purpose, and coaches begin asking rather than telling: what did you decide, and between what? Self-control also matters beyond training, shaping how players treat each other.

A group that can discuss its impulses maintains standards between players, argues less, and performs more consistently by reducing reactions to decisions, provocations, and mistakes.

Stage 4
13-14 years



Strategies, goal setting, restraint under social pressure

Competing demands intensify as adolescents gain self-control but face stronger peer, status, and performance pressures. The focus shifts to practical strategies, such as routines before set pieces, resetting after mistakes, and goal setting that gives restraint a purpose. Because failures of self-control are often public, players need protection from criticism, while the coach's composure provides a visible model.

Cohesion depends on handling provocation without retaliation and maintaining roles and team shape despite frustration.

Stage 5
15-16 years



Anticipation, if–then plans, conduct off the pitch

Players can plan for situations where self-control may fail. As decision-making improves, the focus extends beyond games to off-pitch behaviour. Practice centres on anticipating triggers and deciding responses in advance, using if–then plans, pre-game routines, or self-talk rather than relying on willpower in the moment.

Players also learn to reduce temptations through their environment. Reliability builds trust: arriving prepared, accepting unrewarding roles, and showing consistency are what teammates notice across a season.

Stage 6
17–18 years



Independence, pressure, own standards

Self-control should now operate without the coach, including under fatigue and provocation. With motivation largely self-sustaining, the focus shifts to sport-specific pressure and anxiety, such as penalties, protecting a lead, or difficult decisions.

Coaches should test self-control through realistic simulations and unpredictable situations while players increasingly set and maintain team standards themselves. Teams at this stage stay organised and composed under pressure, while players who regulate anxiety can focus on the task when it matters most.

2. COACHES' BEHAVIOUR

2.1. Coaching style

2.1.1. Scientific grounding

Two findings from the theory chapter shape how a coach should approach this competence. First, self-control failures reflect shifts in motivation and attention rather than an exhausted resource (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012), which means the productive response to a lapse is to ask what the player was attending to and what they wanted, not to demand more effort. Second, the effect of self-control on long-term outcomes is robust and follows a gradient (De Ridder et al., 2012; Moffitt et al., 2011), which means this work is worth doing with every player rather than only with those who visibly struggle.

The coach's own conduct is part of the method. Coaches are watched closely by younger players in particular, and are expected to model the standards they set before, during and after matches (World Association of Basketball Coaches, n.d.). A coach who loses composure with an official while demanding composure from a fourteen-year-old is teaching the more memorable of the two lessons.

Leadership style matters for the same reason. Approaches that place responsibility with the athlete and support their development, rather than controlling behaviour through sanction, are associated with more effective coaching relationships in sport (Rieke, Hammermeister & Chase, 2008). The aim throughout is that responsibility for self-control transfers steadily to the players, so that it no longer depends on the coach being present (Rutgers Youth Sports Research Council, n.d.).

2.1.2. Practical implications

The idea of coaching self-control, self-discipline, and discipline is that the responsibility for all three is eventually placed on the shoulders of the athletes and becomes self-sustaining (Rutgers Youth Sports Research Council, n.d.). Although this chapter focused on the importance of self-control and self-discipline for the players, self-control is of similar importance for the coach. Coaches are often looked up to, especially by younger players, therefore it is of importance for them to set a good example before, during and after games (World Association of Basketball Coaches, n.d.).

Leadership Style

While there is no single method or leadership style that teaches discipline, it is important that the leadership style the coach chooses is linked to the way discipline is applied (Rutgers Youth Sports Research Council, n.d.; Merino, 2021). Merino (2021) argues for discipline to be carried out under a democratic leadership style where a transgression from disciplined behaviour negatively affects group cohesion.

Consequently, a democratic style can contribute to the construction of a positive team identity and group cohesion. The Rutgers Youth Sports Research Council (n.d.) suggest a similar way of coaching; coaches are encouraged to establish their authority early to make sure that the athletes do not relate to the coach as a peer. However, the coach should still relate to his athletes in a warm and friendly way. The coach should specifically work with positive and encouraging comments to create greater fun and a higher willingness to continue an activity or start a new one, especially when this activity requires exerting self-control or takes place after an activity that required exerting self-control (Merino, 2021).

Another possible leadership style is the servant leadership where the needs of the players are given priority. A servant leader thereby is characterised as selfless, caring, and giving and arguably highly important for the development of the players. Especially because the responsibility is eventually to be placed on the shoulders of the players, this leadership style does exactly that by providing the players with autonomy, authority and the tools to be successful (Weber et al., 2020). Rieke et al. (2008) conducted a study on the servant leadership style in high school sport and found that those athletes that perceive their coach as a servant leader showed higher intrinsic motivation, were mentally tougher, and performed better; therefore, showing the potential of the servant leadership style.

In summary, it is of importance that coaches create an autonomy-supportive climate for their players including the appropriate structure and involvement to enhance their intrinsic and autonomous motivation in football (Jordalen et al., 2018).

2.2. Choice of words

Stage 1
7-8 years



One rule at a time, stated positively, with the successful moment named immediately. Children at this age cannot hold several instructions at once, and instructions phrased as prohibitions are harder to act on than instructions phrased as actions.

Example tone:

- *"Freeze — and hold it. Well done, you stopped straight away." (single rule, immediate naming)*
- *"Wait for my word. Then go." (restraint framed as the task)*
- *"That was hard to wait for, and you did it." (effort attribution)*
- *"What is our one rule in this game?" (rule made explicit and repeatable)*

Stage 2
9-10 years



Players can hold a rule across an activity and can notice, afterwards, when they did not. Language should point at the moment of impulse and give it a name they can use.

Example tone:

- *"What happened just before you dived into that tackle?" (locating the impulse)*
- *"You wanted to shoot there. You passed instead — why?" (surfacing the choice)*
- *"You stopped yourself that time. Did you notice?" (making success visible)*
- *"The rule held for the whole game today." (duration as the achievement)*

Stage 3
11-12 years



Restraint now needs a purpose the player owns. Language should connect the immediate decision to something they have said they want, and should start asking rather than telling.

Example tone:

- *"What were you deciding between there?" (decision made explicit)*
- *"Does that choice get you closer to what you told me you wanted?" (linking restraint to a goal)*
- *"Hard to do the boring thing when the exciting thing is right there." (naming the conflict honestly)*
- *"What is the standard we agreed for this?" (shared rather than imposed standard)*

Stage 4
13-14 years



The social cost of restraint is high at this stage and public correction does disproportionate damage. Language should protect the player in front of the group and offer a concrete strategy rather than an instruction to try harder.

Example tone:

- *"That reaction cost us. Let us talk about it after — not now." (correction deferred and made private)*
- *"What could you do in the ten seconds after a bad touch?" (a strategy, not more effort)*
- *"You held that for seventy minutes. What changed at the end?" (credit before correction)*
- *"What pulls your attention away when it gets tight?" (attention, not willpower)*

Stage 5
15-16 years



Players can now anticipate the situations in which they tend to lose control and plan for them. Language should move the work before the moment rather than after it.

Example tone:

- *"Which situations do you already know are difficult for you?" (anticipation)*
- *"If that happens on Saturday, what is your plan?" (deciding in advance)*
- *"What makes it easier for you to hold that standard?" (conditions, not character)*
- *"Was that a decision or a reaction?" (distinguishing the two)*

Stage 6
17–18 years



The aim is self-control that operates without the coach and survives fatigue and provocation. Language should hand over responsibility and test whether it holds.

Example tone:

- *"How do you keep your standards when nobody is checking?" (transfer beyond the club)*
- *"You set the standard for that group today. Did they follow it?" (responsibility for others)*
- *"What would have to happen for you to lose it in that situation?" (knowing one's own limits)*
- *"That is the version of you I would sign. Can you repeat it in April?" (consistency as the test)*

Because self-control failures reflect motivation and attention rather than a depleted resource (Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012), language that simply demands more effort tends not to work. Language that redirects attention, or that reconnects the player with what they are trying to achieve, tends to work better. Three rules hold at every stage: name the behaviour rather than the character, address the moment of choice rather than the outcome, and keep correction private as players get older. The stage sections below show how the wording changes with age.

The choice of words by the coach is of importance for the development of self-control and self-discipline in their players. The verbal language of the coach should align with the general leadership style chosen; Rutgers Youth Sports Research Council (n.d.) suggest that coaches set clear boundaries and establish authority early on but simultaneously use positive and encouraging language with their players. Coaches should consider making use of humor as a strategy instead of lecturing their players after a bad performance (Beckmann & Beckmann-Waldenmayer, 2020). Especially after a self-control exercises, it is relevant that the coach creates pride and fun with the language used and reminds their players of the reasons they are doing this hard work:

- *I know it has been hard to stay focused on this exercise, but you did a great job today!*
- *Remember, you are making the decision to come to training every day and give your best in the exercises because your goal is to play in the first division!*

It is additionally relevant to engage with the players and use feedback to increase their commitment:

- *Is there anything that is currently limiting your commitment (and enjoyment)?*
- *How can I (as your coach) increase your commitment?*
- *Have you seen the success of these exercises for you on the field? How and where? (Reminder of why self-control exercises are necessary)*

2.3. Body language

Body language refers to gestures, postures, and facial expressions through which the coach communicates non-verbally with the athletes. As for most skills, the coach should mirror his/her expectations of the players. Therefore, the coach should stay calm and self-controlled even when emotions are high during training sessions or games. The coaches' body language should be encouraging and positive in order to create a positive and fun environment that the players want to be part of. Coaches can make use of specific gestures to motivate their players, such as a hand-sign of circles to encourage the players to keep going.

Eye Contact

- Keep steady, calm eye contact when a player reacts emotionally. Do not stare.
- Find the player's eyes after a loss of temper to reconnect before correcting.
- Use eye contact to confirm that a rule or agreement has been understood.

Facial Expression

- Keep a composed expression in heated training & match situations.
- Avoid visible anger after poor decisions by players or referees.
- Show calm approval when a player walks away from a provocation.



Gestures

- Use the circle hand sign to encourage players to keep going.
- Make slow, deliberate movements. Do not throw your arms up.
- Use one agreed stop signal to pause play and reset.

Posture

- Stand upright and still when the game is tense. Avoid pacing the touchline.
- Keep shoulders down and the body relaxed, e.g. after a contested decision.
- Pause for one breath before speaking to a player after a reaction.reaction.

Positioning & Distance

- Approach players calmly after a reaction; do not shout across the pitch.
- Keep a respectful distance during corrections so players don't feel cornered.
- Stay where you can see the whole group, and step in quietly if needed.

3. TRAINING

THE DEVELOPMENT JOURNEY

of self-control from foundation to maturity:



7-8 years

1. Keep to a rule agreed at the start, and say when it has been broken.
2. Stop an action when the signal is given, and restart when it is given again.
3. Play the next action after a knock, a lost ball or a foul rather than answering it.



9-10 years

1. Name the feeling that came in the seconds before reacting to a foul or mistake.
2. Stay in the given role for the whole round, incl. while the ball is elsewhere.
3. Wait out the consequence the rule sets before rejoining play.



11-12 years

1. Keep to a team agreement in front of teammates who are not keeping it.
2. Prepare one agreed thing alone before the next session, and report it.
3. Say which part of a plan did not work, and what will change.



13-14 years

1. Name one thing given up in the past week for a football goal, and what it cost.
2. Plan “if this happens, I will do that” for a situation where control is usually lost.
3. Keep working on a correction after the relevant part of the session has ended.



15-16 years

1. Develop if–then plans for behaviours that support long-term goals on and off field.
2. Change something in the situation so the temptation does not arise.
3. Use the same self-chosen routine before, during and after a game.



17-18 years

1. Run that routine without being prompted, and adjust it when it stops working.
2. Identify helpful and unhelpful self-talk, then use a better version during play.
3. Play on after provocation and name what you noticed in the moment.

Training

7-8 years



3.1. Stage 1 (7-8 years)

3.1.1. Stage characteristics

For this age group, it is of importance to incorporate fun exercises that encourage the players to come back to training. Their motivation is not self-sustaining yet; therefore, self-control exercises can be followed by rewards.

3.1.2. Specific learning objectives

In this developmental stage children are not yet able to discuss the concept of self-control. However, they can control their movements, for instance by making unpredictable changes in training exercises. To start making children understand what controlling themselves means, it is important to let them have fun in their first self-controlling behaviours.

The children can listen to instructions by the coach and can follow them to improve their discipline and listening skills.

In the reflection phase, we want the children to be able to:

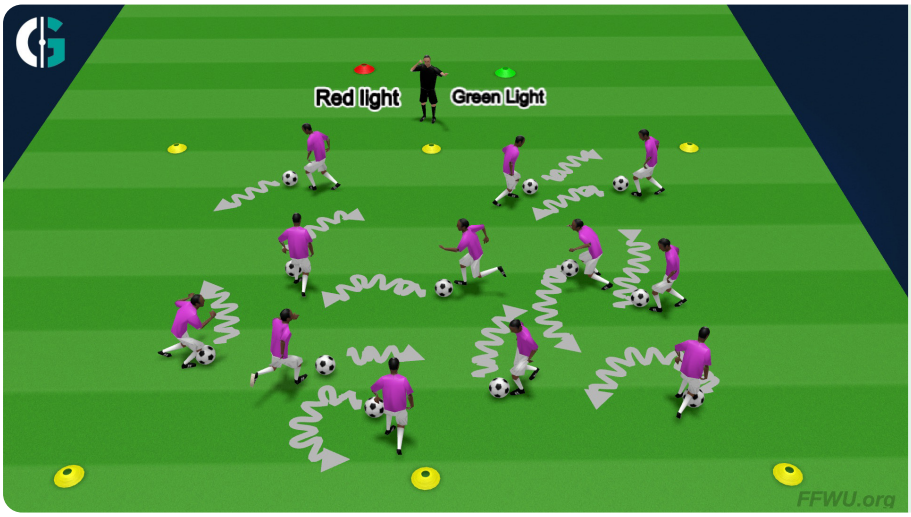
1. Keep to a rule agreed at the start, and say when it has been broken.
2. Stop an action when the signal is given, and restart when it is given again.
3. Play the next action after a knock, a lost ball or a foul rather than answering it.

3.1.3. Coach insight

Children at this age are not being difficult when they cannot stop — they are being seven. Self-control at Stage 1 works in short bursts against one clearly stated rule, and collapses when the rule is complicated, when there are three of them, or when the activity runs too long. Design accordingly: make stopping and waiting the point of the game rather than an interruption to it, and keep rounds short. If half the group cannot hold the rule, the task is too hard, not the players too undisciplined.

EXERCISE

RED LIGHT - GREEN LIGHT



Players	4+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	10 x 10 m
Equipment	balls, 4 cones
Duration	total: 13 min play: 10 min breaks: -
Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Set up a square field with four cones (multiple fields can be set up depending on the number of players)
- Each player gets a ball and starts dribbling in the field
- The coach gives commands; either 'Red Light', 'Orange Light', or 'Green Light'
- On 'Green Light', the players dribble with the ball on their feet, on 'Orange Light', the players dribble slower, and on 'Red Light' the players stop the ball
- Agree at the start that anyone who moves on 'Red Light' says so themselves; the coach does not police it.
- Add a partner who lightly challenges for the ball. A player who loses it collects it and carries on immediately.
- Variations:
  - An additional command such as 'Purple Light' can be added for which the players can think of their own movement, such as having to dance or juggle

Coaching Tips

1. Players may need time to stop the ball or to remember all the commands — **be patient and repeat them**.
2. Call the commands at an **unpredictable rhythm** so that stopping stays a decision rather than a habit.
3. Notice out loud the **players who stop themselves** without being corrected.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players keep to the rule they agreed for 'Red Light', and say when they moved.	○ *Did you move when you should have stopped?* ○ *Why is it easier to say it yourself than to be told?* ○ *Which command did you break most often?*
2	Players stop the ball on the command even when they are already moving.	○ *Was it difficult to change between the colour commands?* ○ *Was it difficult to stay concentrated during instructions?* ○ *Which command was hardest to obey when dribbling?*
3	Players carry on dribbling immediately after losing the ball to the challenging partner.	○ *What did you do straight after you lost the ball?* ○ *How did it feel to carry on instead of stopping?* ○ *What did you enjoy most about this exercise?*

Training

9-10 years



3.2. Stage 2 (9-10 years)

3.2.1. Stage characteristics

For this age group, it is of importance, like stage 1, to incorporate fun exercises that encourage the players to come back to training. Their motivation is not self-sustaining yet; therefore, self-control exercises can be followed by rewards. However, their cognitive self-control is starting to develop, therefore, some reflections on the specifics of the skill can be incorporated.

3.2.2. Specific learning objectives

In this developmental stage children are increasingly able to better control themselves when making more complex movements, for example when having to make unpredictable changes during an exercise. They are starting to become able to replace an impulse, or an automatic action, with a preferred action. Children can also stay in better control of the ball even when in high pressure situations.

In the reflection phase, we want the children to be able to:

1. Name the feeling that came in the seconds before reacting to a foul or mistake.
2. Stay in the given role for the whole round, incl. while the ball is elsewhere.
3. Wait out the consequence the rule sets before rejoining play.

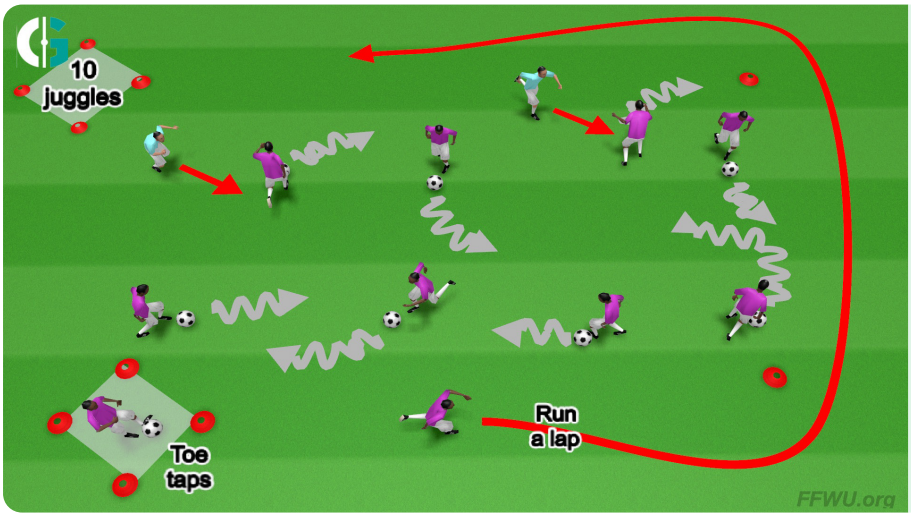
Children are starting to understand more about the meaning of self-control which should be considered.

3.2.3. Coach insight

This is the stage where players can start to notice their own impulses, which is the foundation everything later depends on. The useful moment is not the foul itself but the two seconds before it. Ask what happened just before — not as an accusation but as genuine curiosity — and players will often be able to tell you. Be aware that a player who reacts badly and then cannot explain why is not evading the question; the capacity to reconstruct it is still developing.

EXERCISE

FREE YOURSELF - TAG



Players	7+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	10 x 10 m
Equipment	2 bibs, 4 cones
Duration	total: 13 min play: 10 min breaks: -
Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Two volunteers are given a bib and the power to tag others
- Each other player is given a ball and instructed to run around the field with the ball
- The two players with the bibs can now tag those with the ball
- If tagged, the players stop and use different movements to get free again
  1. Toe taps – five touches each foot
  2. Juggling the ball 10 times
  3. Running 1 lap around the playing field
- Once they are free, they can join the game again
- Change tagging players every 2 minutes
- Roles are fixed for the whole round: taggers stay taggers until the round ends.
- In the break after each round, each player names what they felt in the moment before they were tagged.

Coaching Tips

1. Encourage the players to **keep the ball close to their feet** and their head up to avoid getting tagged.
2. If some players tag too hard, remind them to **tag gently on the shoulder**.
3. To increase the demand on self-control, instruct **tagged players to wait** until they are freed rather than rejoining immediately.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players say what they felt in the moment before they were tagged.	○ *What did you feel in the seconds before you reacted?* ○ *Did naming it change anything in the next round?* ○ *What happened when you saw a tagger coming?*
2	Players stay a tagger for the whole round rather than swapping when tagged.	○ *Was it difficult to make quick changes under pressure?* ○ *Was it harder to stay a tagger for the whole round?* ○ *What kept you going in the role you did not want?*
3	Players wait to be freed before rejoining the game.	○ *Was it difficult to wait until you could rejoin the game?* ○ *Do you know other situations in life where you have to wait?* ○ *Did it become more difficult to stay in control of the ball?*

Training

11-12 years



3.3. Stage 3 (11-12 years)

3.3.1. Stage characteristics

During this stage, players increasingly look for belonging in all areas of life. It becomes therefore crucial to engage in self-control practices and make use of feedback sessions. Players aged 11 to 12 show increased abilities of cognitive self-control.

3.3.2. Specific learning objectives

In this developmental stage children are able to control their movements on the field and actively abstain from impulse behaviour by choosing the preferred action. They are increasingly being able to focus on the task at hand in order to achieve their desired goal. Children in this stage understand the concept of self-control and know of the importance to stay in control themselves in order to reach long-term goals.

In the reflection phase, we want the children to be able to:

1. Keep to a team agreement in front of teammates who are not keeping it.
2. Prepare one agreed thing alone before the next session, and report it.
3. Say which part of a plan did not work, and what will change.

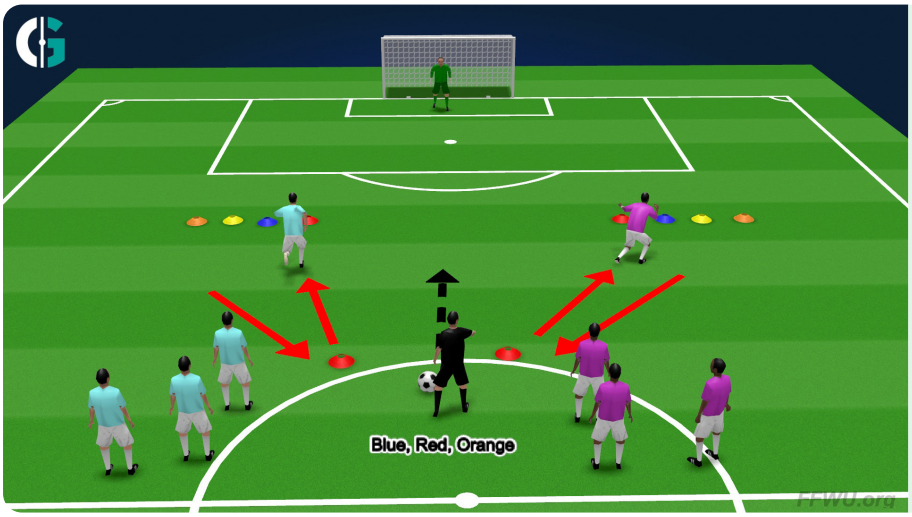
Reflections during this stage can become more conceptual as the players understand what self-control is, define their long-term goals, and connect the two and understand how their behaviour can support them.

3.3.3. Coach insight

Restraint needs a reason, and at this stage players can hold one. A player who has told you what they want will accept a boring repetition that serves it; a player who has not will experience the same repetition as arbitrary. This is also the point at which asking starts to outperform telling. If you find yourself issuing the same correction weekly with no change, the problem is usually that the player has not connected the behaviour to anything they care about.

EXERCISE

FOCUS & FINISH



Players	6+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	50 x 40 m
Equipment	10 cones in multiple colours, two of each
Duration	total: 18 min play:15 min breaks: -
Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Set up the field; the cones should have different colours but the colours on one side should match those on the other side
- Two players go against each other, one on each side
- The coach gives colour commands, such as 'red, white, blue' matching the cone colours
- The players start running towards their respective cones and touch them in the correct order, after which they run around the cone at the centre line
- The coach passes the ball through the cones at the centre line so that the players can reach it before the box to create a tackling situation
- The player who reacts first controls the ball and shoots at the goal.
- Before starting, the group agrees one rule for the exercise — for example, that nobody calls out the colour for another player.
- Before each round, each player says which part of the task they will focus on, and in the break says what did not work.

Coaching Tips

1. Give the players time to **get used to this exercise**, as it requires focus and self-control.
2. Start with two or three colours and **increase the number later on**.
3. Ask afterwards **which colour was hardest** to hold in mind, and why.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players keep to the rule the group agreed before the colour commands start.	○ *Did anyone break the rule the group agreed?* ○ *Is it harder to keep an agreement when others don't?* ○ *Which rule did the group choose, and why?*
2	Players prepare one agreed thing on their own before the next session, and report it.	○ *What did you prepare on your own before this session?* ○ *What made it easy or hard to do?* ○ *How will this help you reach your long-term football goal?*
3	Players say which part of their colour plan did not work, and what they will change.	○ *When was it important that you controlled yourself?* ○ *Which part of your plan did'nt work? What will you change?* ○ *Which colour was hardest to hold in mind?*

Training

13-14 years



3.4. Stage 4 (13-14 Years)

3.4.1. Stage characteristics

Adolescents during this stage are increasingly able to cognitively control themselves. As social relationships become more important, self-control is essential on and off the field. Feedback sessions, as well as sessions focusing on long-term goal setting are useful.

3.4.2. Specific learning objectives

In this developmental stage players are able to extend their self-controlling behaviour beyond the field. They should learn to control their behaviour before, during, and after games and training sessions, especially when facing pressure situations. The players show an understanding for the importance of self-control on and off the field, as well as being self-controlled to reach long-term goals.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

1. Name one thing given up in the past week for a football goal, and what it cost.
2. Plan “if this happens, I will do that” for a situation where control is usually lost.
3. Keep working on a correction after the relevant part of the session has ended.

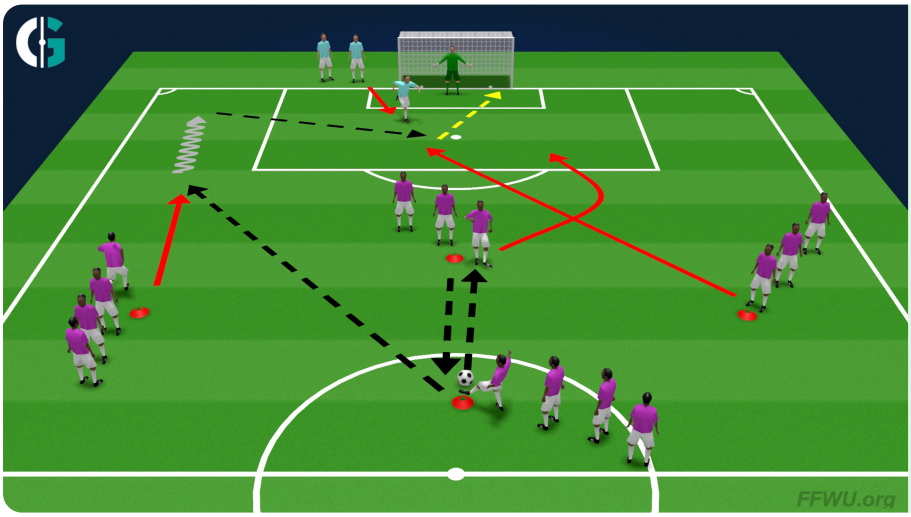
During this stage, players can actively connect their behaviour off the field with goals on the field.

3.4.3. Coach insight

Expect self-control to get worse at this stage, and expect the causes to be social rather than moral. Holding a standard in front of peers now carries a cost that it did not at eleven, and public criticism raises that cost sharply. Correct privately. It is also worth being honest with yourself about the difference between a player who will not and a player who cannot in that moment — the response to the first is a conversation, and to the second, a strategy they can actually use.

EXERCISE

LATE RUNS INTO THE BOX



Players	8+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	40 x 40 m
Equipment	1 goal, 1 ball, 4 cones
Duration	total: 21 min play: 18 min breaks: -
Author	SJ Weber

Description

- One half of the football field is used for this exercise; set field up as displayed
- One player is set as the defender starting close to the box
- Each cone is covered with one player
- Player at cone (1) starts and passes the ball to cone (2), who passes it back to (1) who then passes to either cone (3) or (4)
- The respective player runs with the ball down the line and crosses the ball into the box
- The player who starts at cone (2) is to time his run into the box after having passed the ball back to cone (1) while the defending player tries to defend the crossing
- Before the second round, each player writes an if-then plan for the moment they usually go too early.
- The coach gives one correction on the timing of the run, and the player applies it for the rest of the exercise.

Coaching Tips

1. Make sure that passes to cones (3) and (4) are **equally** being made.
2. The players should **rotate after one round** so that each player plays each position.
3. Watch the **timing of the run** rather than the finish — a player who goes early has lost the restraint the exercise trains.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players name one thing they gave up in the past week for a football goal.	○ *What did you give up this week for a football goal?* ○ *How does this help you reach your long-term goals?* ○ *Was it worth it?*
2	Players write an if-then plan for the moment they usually make the run too early.	○ *What is the moment in which you usually go too early?* ○ *What will you do instead when that moment comes?* ○ *Did your plan hold in the next round?*
3	Players keep applying the correction on run timing after the round in which they got it.	○ *When in the game did you feel you had to control yourself?* ○ *Did you keep applying the correction in later rounds?* ○ *Where else on or off the field do you need self-control?*

Training

15-16 years



3.5. Stage 5 (15-16 years)

3.5.1. Stage characteristics

Players in this stage show increased abilities to make decisions but often find themselves in trouble with the law or drug abuse. Therefore, exercises focusing on self-control should include self-control before, during, and after training sessions and games, as well as include behaviour off the field.

3.5.2. Specific learning objectives

In this developmental stage, players understand the importance of self-control on and off the field and are able to recognise in game-like situations, especially those that involve high pressure, the need to control themselves. The players further understand ways to change their behaviour on and off the field through making quick decisions and staying self-controlled.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

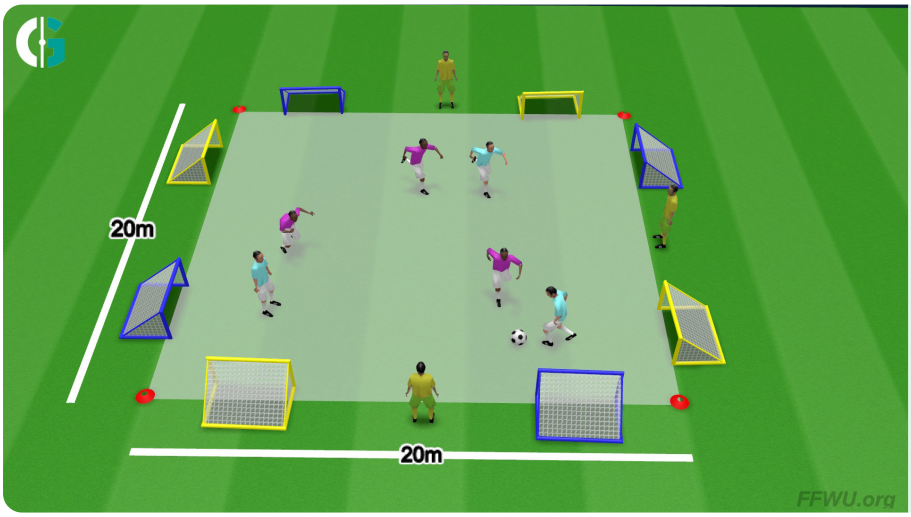
1. Develop if–then plans for behaviours that support long-term goals on and off field.
2. Change something in the situation so the temptation does not arise.
3. Use the same self-chosen routine before, during and after a game.

3.5.3. Coach insight

The most useful shift at this stage is moving the work before the moment. Asking a player to control themselves during a provocation asks a great deal; asking them beforehand which situations tend to catch them, and what they intend to do, asks much less and works better. Most players can name their own triggers accurately if given the chance. Plans made in the calm of a Tuesday hold up far better than resolve summoned on a Saturday.

EXERCISE

PRESSURE SITUATIONS



Players	9+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	20 x 20m
Equipment	several balls, 8 mini-goals, 6 bibs (3 in one colour), 4 cones
Duration	total: 15 min play: 12 min breaks: -
Author	SJ Weber

Description

- The coach sets up a square field with one goal on each side of the field
- 9 players are put into three different teams (if more players are available, a second field can be set up)
- Two teams start and play 3 v 3 on all eight goals
- When a goal is scored, the team that received the goal against them goes off the field and the third team play against the team that scored the goal
- Encourage the players to make switches quickly. Be aware of possible problems and make changes accordingly
- Goals can be removed if goals are scored too quickly.
- Each round begins and ends with a short routine the player chooses for themselves.
- After each round, players name one change to their own positioning or preparation that would make the provocation easier to handle, and apply it in the next round.

Coaching Tips

1. Prepare the **discussion around concrete situations**: chasing the ball back after losing possession, following up every pass, handling provocation by opponents, and dealing with difficult referee decisions.
2. Let a provocation **play out rather than stopping it**, then discuss what happened afterwards.
3. Recognise the players **who stay composed** as clearly as those who win the ball.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players write implementation intentions for the behaviours their long-term goal depends on.	○ *Which behaviours does your long-term goal depend on?* ○ *What is your if-then plan for the hardest of them?* ○ *Where else on or off the field do you need self-control?*
2	Players change their own positioning or preparation so the provocation is easier to handle.	○ *What did you change so the situation was easier to handle?* ○ *Did it work in the next round?* ○ *Which strategies helped you adapt to the game's changes?*
3	Players use the same routine before and after every round.	○ *What was your routine before and after the round?* ○ *Was it the same every time?* ○ *Was it more difficult to control yourself under pressure?*

Training

17-18 years



3.6. Stage 6 (17-18 years)

3.6.1. Stage characteristics

Youth aged between 17 and 18 often have a self-sustaining motivation in playing football. Nevertheless, it is useful to continue training self-control especially when it comes to high pressure and anxiety situations in football.

3.6.2. Specific learning objectives

In this developmental stage, players should be able to recognise game-like situations that require self-control, especially during high-pressure and anxiety situations. They should now have a fleshed out understanding of way to change their behaviour on and off the field in order to reach their long-term goals. Beyond the football field, they now have an increased ability to self-regulate and self-control during high-pressure and anxiety situations through adapting to changes in an appropriate manner and are able to make decisions quickly.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

1. Run that routine without being prompted, and adjust it when it stops working.
2. Identify helpful and unhelpful self-talk, then use a better version during play.
3. Play on after provocation and name what you noticed in the moment.

3.6.3. Coach insight

The test of this competence is what a player does when nobody is watching, when they are tired, and when they have been provoked. So the work at this stage is to create those conditions deliberately and then stay out of the way. Resist supplying the composure yourself. A player who needs your voice to stay disciplined has not yet learned self-control — they have learned compliance, and it will not travel with them to the next club.

EXERCISE

HIGH PRESSURE POSSESSION



Players	15+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	half field
Equipment	1 ball, 8 bibs, 8 cones
Duration	total: 25 min play: 3 x 6 min breaks: 2 min
Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Two teams play against each other on the field, whereby one neutral player is playing on the field with the team that is in current possession
- Two additional neutral players play behind the line of the goals, one on each side. Therefore, a 5 (+3) v 5 is created
- The players gain different points depending on from where they score the goal:
  - The third half, closest to the goal they are attempting to score into, counts 3 points
  - The middle part counts 2 points
  - The part furthest away counts 1 point
- Players use their own routine before, during and after the game, without being prompted.
- Before the game each player names one unhelpful thing they say to themselves and a rewritten version; afterwards they say whether they used it.

Coaching Tips

1. Encourage the players to **use the neutral players** and keep possession of the ball.
2. Increase the pressure **gradually** — the exercise only trains self-control once losing possession costs something.
3. Ask players what they felt **in the moment before** they gave a foul or argued a decision.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players run their own routine in the possession game without being prompted.	○ *What was your routine, and did you need to be reminded?* ○ *What did you change when it stopped working?* ○ *How can these strategies be relevant for other situations?*
2	Players name the unhelpful thing they say to themselves and use the rewritten version in the game.	○ *Which thing you say to yourself gets in the way?* ○ *What did you say instead, and at what moment?* ○ *What can you take away from this game for a real game?*
3	Players play the next action after a disputed decision, with no referee to settle it.	○ *How did you handle situations that tested your self-control?* ○ *What did you notice in the moment before you reacted?* ○ *How did your team settle the disputes?*

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