

**BILL BESWICK PRESENTATION  
NSCAA CONVENTION, PHILADELPHIA, JANUARY 2006**

**WINNING IS ALSO A MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL JOURNEY – A  
PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF A BIG GAME**

I have mentored Steve McClaren for 10 years from U-17 youth coach to Assistant Manager at Manchester United, England Coach, and Manager at Middlesbrough Football club.

4 key themes have dominated our discussions on trying to produce a winning team:

- Talent
- Preparation
- Attitude
- Coaching game day

Today I am going to focus on game day – but get talent, preparation, and attitude wrong and game day will be an unhappy experience.

Of course you can work on all these and game day can still be an unhappy experience.

We prepare 3 game plans – physical, tactical and mental – to try to help our players prepare for all eventualities.

**GAME PLANNING –  
COACHES SHOULD PREPARE :**

1. A Physical Game Plan
2. A Tactical Game Plan
3. A Mental Game Plan

**SPORTSMIND**

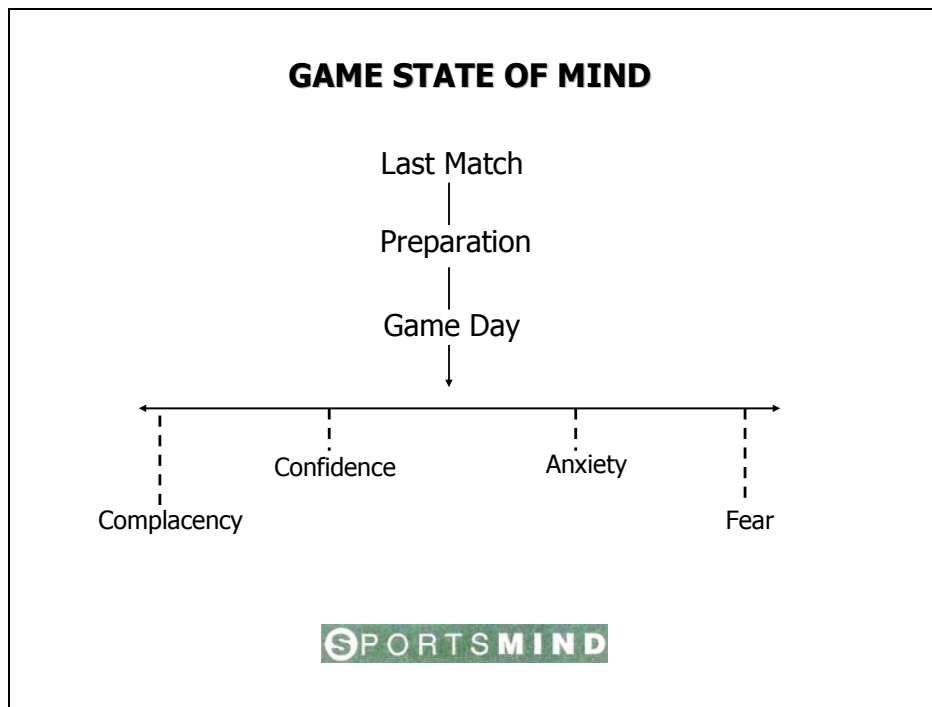
In the mental game plan I focus on:

- building a winning state of mind
- recovery from setbacks
- emotional control

This presentation is to share with you my attempts to understand mental game planning and the effects of a game's unfolding sequence of events that cannot be scripted.

**Pre-game** – Let's begin by looking at pre-game:

- a team arrives at the kick-off with a collective state of mind (though coaches must be aware of individual players who may have an overriding personal agenda).



I take a view that there are 4 key states of mind that a coach might find their team in at kick off.

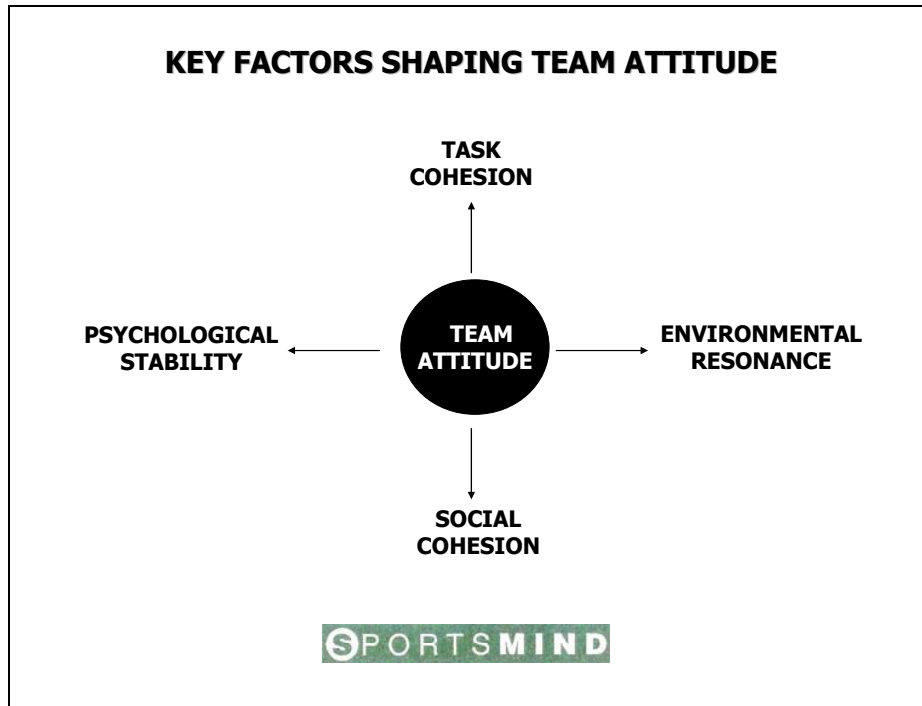
- |             |   |   |
|-------------|---|---|
| Fear        | - | `we have not won for a while and we won't today – it might be embarrassing – I wish I was somewhere else..'         |
| Anxiety     | - | `we have a chance but I'm not sure – we don't really understand the game plan – they look bigger than us..'         |
| Confidence  | - | `there is no reason we should not win – we have our best team out today – they are not so good...'                  |
| Complacency | - | `this will be easy just like the last few games – it's only a question of how many – we won't need much effort ...' |

Coaches must find strategies to spot the signals that tell them where their team is on the continuum – and take action if necessary.

Coaches must also understand the impact on the team's pre-game state of mind of:

- their preparation strategies
- the context of the game

We identify 4 key factors that shape attitude as a team prepares to play:



1. Task Cohesion:
  - proper preparation
  - clarity of the game plan
  - injuries and selection
2. Social Cohesion:
  - togetherness – we not me
  - senior leadership
  - inspirational coaching
3. Environmental Resonance
  - home or away/weather/pitch
  - loss of routine – administration errors
  - distraction control

#### 4. Psychological Stability

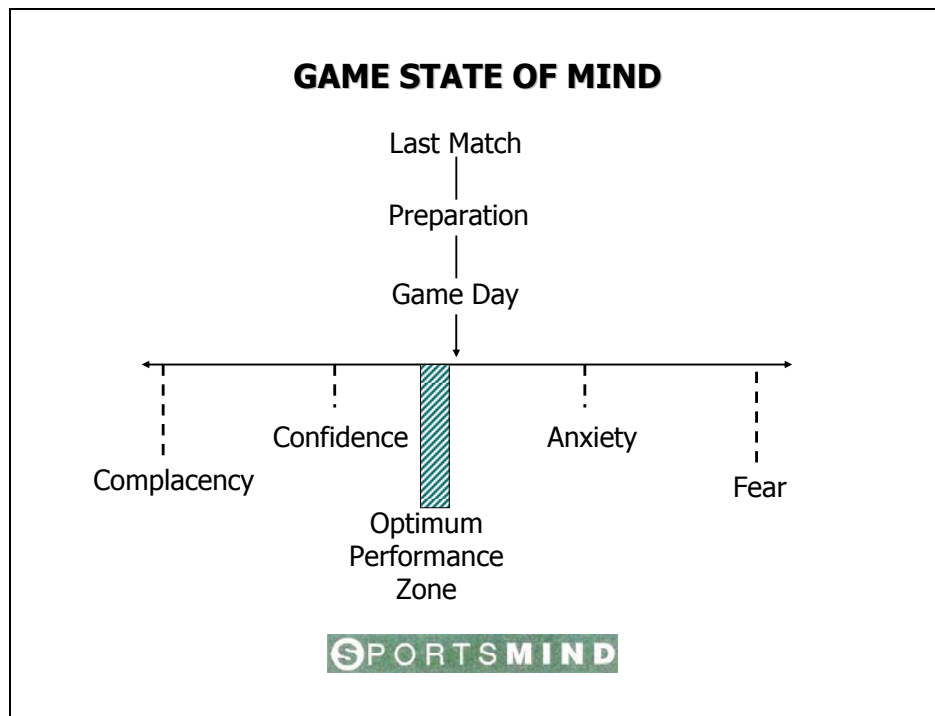
- overall W/L record, especially last 3 games
- significance of the game
- mindset of the coach – optimism/pessimism
- inspirational players

Any or all of these factors can act in positive or negative ways to affect individuals or the teams attitude.

Coaches I have surveyed believe attitude is 50% of winning – so the game may be won or lost before it has started.

So coaches must:

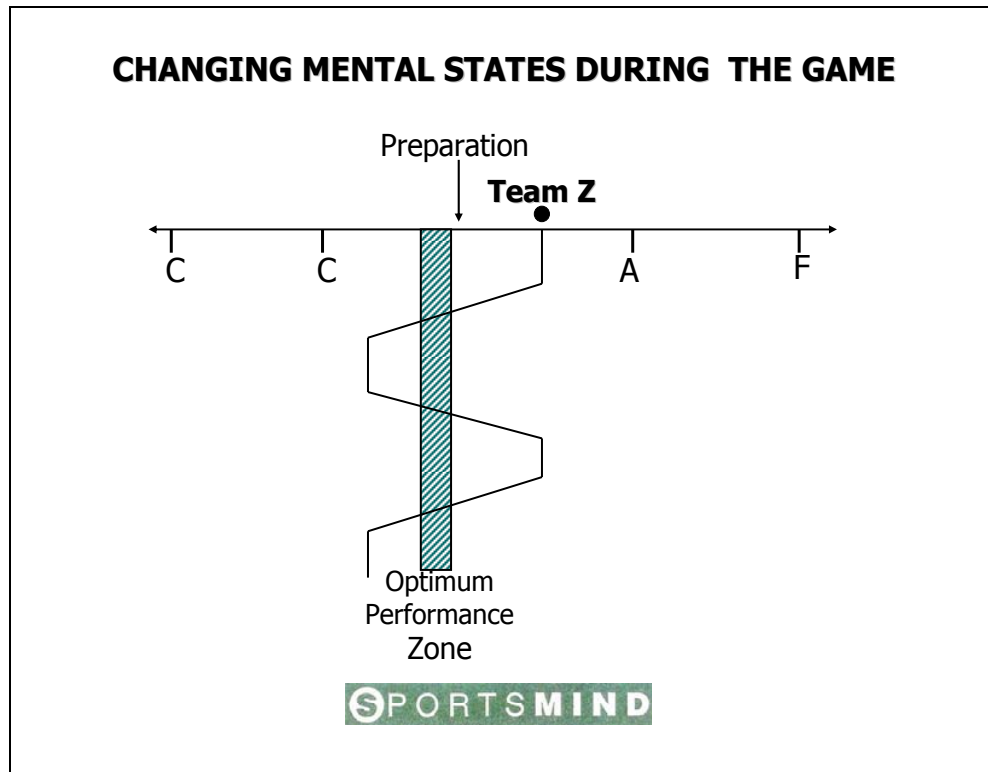
- understand the impact of preparation strategies
- have ways of assessing the collective mental state of their team as game time nears
- be able to adjust any discrepancies toward the 'optimum performance zone'



Generally the optimum performance zone is regarded as being between confidence and anxiety – probably slightly more toward confidence.

The value of a sound basis of confidence is easy to understand but coaches will also appreciate the “energising” and “focusing” impact of a little anxiety – many champions admit that a fear of failure and nervous anxiety was key to them reaching a “warrior” mentality.

**Kick-off** – OK – we have reached kick-off in a positive state of mind but now we are at the mercy of events – and events which will affect the mental state of your team positively or negatively. Don’t forget though that that also applies to your opponents. One of the things I do is watch the other team go in a half-time and ask myself the question – where are they mentally and what might their coach do?



So coaching a game will mean understanding and dealing with changing mental states – yours and your opponents. The next slide shows some of the factors that can occur within the game that can change mental states.

## FACTORS WITHIN GAME THAT CAN CHANGE MENTAL STATE

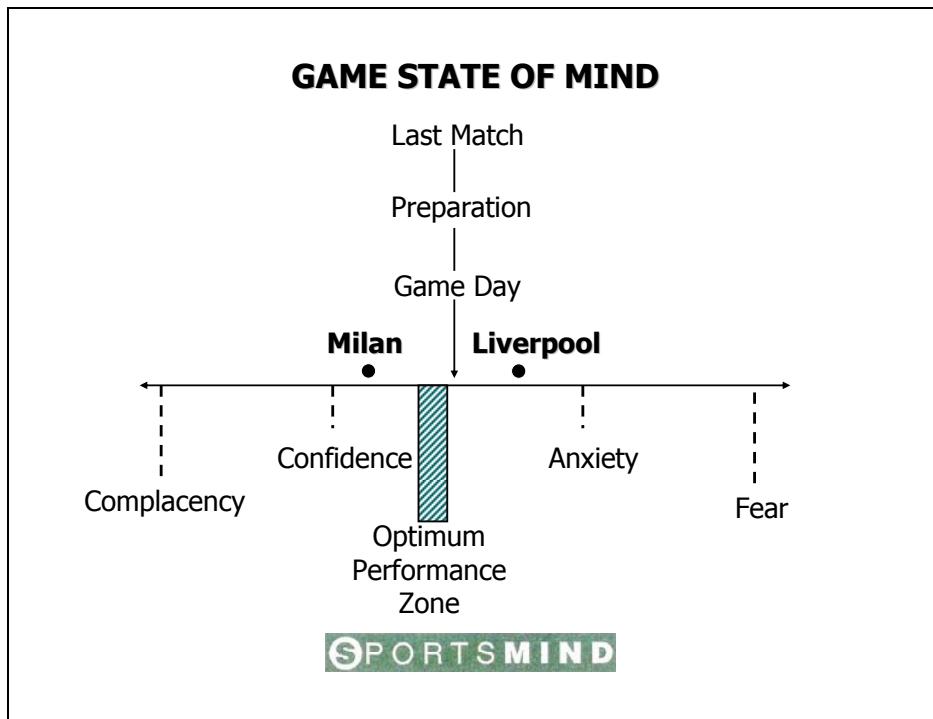
- Change Of Score
- Missed Chances
- Mistakes
- Injury
- Substitutions
- Refereeing Decisions
- Fatigue
- Choking On A Lead
- Lack Of Team Spirit
- Changing Weather – Playing Surface
- Loss Of Emotional Control – Retaliation
- Distractions - Crowd



### Case Study

Now let's examine these concepts during the course of the 2005 European Cup Final between Milan and Liverpool.

What might have been the mental states of the two teams at kick off?



We can see that I believe Milan started the game more confidently than Liverpool

Milan, 4 times winners of this trophy, expect to reach such a Final – and have not conceded a goal in the previous 6 rounds.

Liverpool are unexpected finalists after a very poor season, a shock semi-final win over Chelsea, and probably feel lucky to be there.

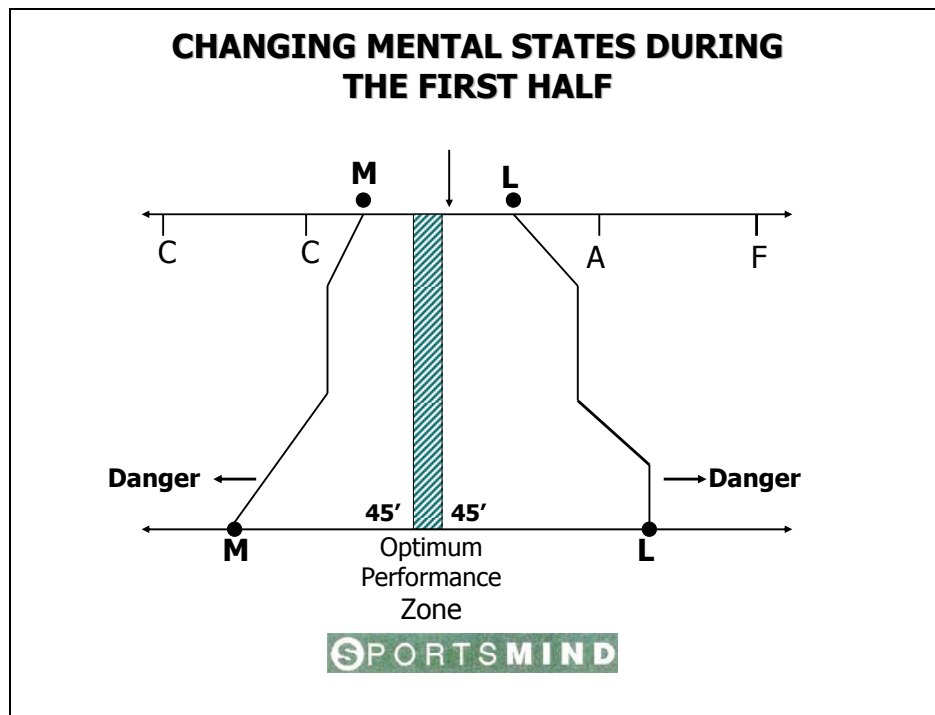
Given that basis for each team's collective mental state let's watch the kick off and the first 50 seconds, which show Milan scoring the fastest goal in European Cup history.

From then the rhythm of the game and all the defining moments go in Milan's favour. In the 38<sup>th</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> minutes of the half we can now see Milan score their 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> goals.

The T.V. quotes all England heard were:

- "Nobody can live with Milan"
- "Liverpool all but beaten before half-time"
- "Matador football from Milan"
- "Nothing has gone right for Liverpool tonight"

Let's check both teams' mental progress during the first half – where they started and where they finished the half.



**Half-time:** all coaches understand the importance of half-time but not all are equipped intellectually or emotionally to make the break work in their favour.

As a sports psychologist I see a wonderful opportunity to reprogramme my team's software and move them toward the optimum performance zone.

Clearly the coach of Milan faces the threat of complacency – his team feeling that all that is left is to lift the trophy.

(anyone remember Bayern Munich v Manchester United...?)

Coach Benitez faces an anxious, depressed team that might lack the physical, mental, and emotional resolve to fight back. He must show the most important characteristics of great leaders:

- holding his nerve
- knowing how to bounce back

### **HALF TIME – REPROGRAMMING A TEAM'S MENTAL STATE**

Look Forward, Not Back  
Accept Responsibility For Situation  
Keep What Is Working  
Change What Is Not  
'Sell' The New Game Plan  
Rebuild Belief  
Rebuild Enthusiasm  
Appeal To Senior Leaders  
Challenge Team To Win Second Half  
Demand They Stay In The Game

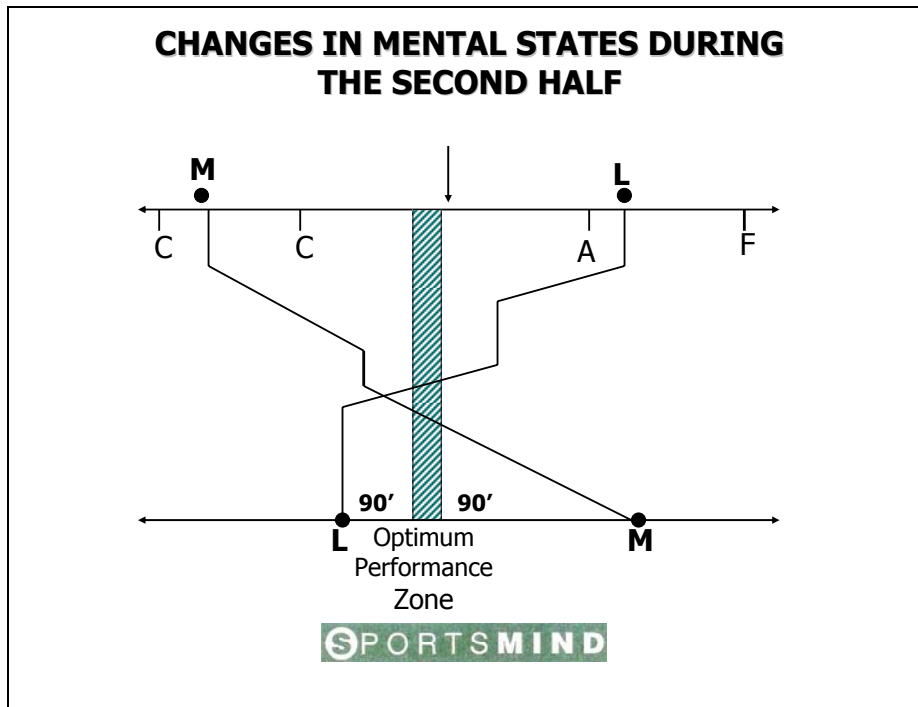


The slide shows that there are strategies for reprogramming mental states at half-time. Coach Benitez probably used all these, plus changing the game plan – moving Gerrard forward – and using a personnel change – Hamman coming on.

**Second Half:** almost immediately the rhythm of the game changes and Liverpool begin to feed off positives whilst Milan feel complacency turning into anxiety. The game changed dramatically between the 52<sup>nd</sup> and 59<sup>th</sup> minute when Liverpool scored 3 goals.

Let's examine what is happening to the mental states of the teams.





A dramatic turnaround – physically, tactically and mentally but there are 30 minutes left (plus the possibility of extra time) and the 2 teams have undergone a complete change of mental and emotional state. Incidentally so have the fans and their emotional state will also affect the players.

Both teams are still in danger.

**Milan** – will either collapse mentally into 'fear' or they will wake up to the fact that they can still win if they can refocus and re-energise.

**Liverpool** – might just feel they have done the job and dip after an emotionally draining 15 minutes and run out of energy.

Both coaches will try to affect this by changing tactics, or substituting personnel but in the end they will rely on the mental strength and good habits of their players.

Not surprisingly the game slowed down from minute 60 – both teams lost the courage to win and were desperate not to lose.

In the end it was decided on penalties and Liverpool held their nerve and technique better to go on and win – underlining the key lesson for all coaches : **stay in the game.**

In conclusion I have tried to show, I admit a little simplistically, how a coach's mind would work during a game in assessing their team's ongoing mental state.

I have also tried to show some of the strategies you can adopt in influencing your team's mental state and especially the importance of an emotionally controlled, well prepared, and positive half-time, and always being prepared for anything to happen.

I hope this can be of help to you – good luck with your coaching.