If the above statement is correct, then as coaches we must ask ourselves how much time we spend on conditioning the mental muscles of our rugby players, relative to their physical conditioning.

I believe that most rugby players and coaches focus on the physical and technical side of training and spend little time on the psychological component of sport performance. If this is so, then this is an area we can greatly improve on.

What precisely should we be trying to do, and how do we go about it?

As coaches we need to assist players to control and develop the thoughts that enter their conscious minds, which in turn condition their subconscious.

The Universe and everyone and everything that comprises it is made of energy. Thoughts are a form of energy and are extremely powerful when they are positive and cause devastating results when they are negative.

During each training session, a player’s subconscious mind records all his thoughts, attitudes, technique, level of effort, and his emotions towards his rugby - and uses all this information towards his future games. The subconscious is the player’s control center of all movement and also is his human computer’s hard drive – it contains his entire life's memories - including all his rugby 'experiences'. This is where all his 'experience' is stored which he draws upon at each game. The subconscious works just like a computer, and is being constantly programmed by the thoughts, images, words and statements chosen by the player.

Positive thoughts generally result in positive results, and vice versa.

It is therefore essential to provide good daily habits for the player’s subconscious to record for his future games. This means that, if a player wants to be consistent in games, then he must be equally consistent in his daily practice - physically and mentally consistent.

The blueprint for how a game will turn out already exists - it was created by the players’ past habits, thoughts and actions over recent months and years.

This blueprint may be bad or good. If it is bad, then your players have the wrong program running in their conscious and unconscious minds.

If your team needs to change your results then your players need to change their body's 'programming' within their subconscious.

One often hears people talking of players who are “Mentally Tough”.
But what is ‘Mental Toughness’? In short, it resides in players who are running the best programs in their minds consciously and unconsciously.

It is Persistence and Belief that one’s goal is achievable – no matter what the level of externally perceived adversity exists. The ability to never give up – no matter what the circumstances or the adversary.

If a rugby player is not mentally tough, it matters not if they have the perfect technique, a perfect body, perfect weight, plus all the rugby knowledge in the world - because it’s only through the mind that a player is allowed to use all these advantages. If their mind is not ‘programmed’ for success, then nerves, intimidation, doubt or fear may stop them from playing anywhere near the level their potential would suggest.

As soon as we decide something is impossible, it becomes impossible - because our mind then firmly programs our body not to achieve it.

As Henry Ford once said:

If you think you can do a thing or think you can't do a thing, you're right”.

Such is the power of one’s mind.

So how do we go about programming our players’ conscious and subconscious minds for success, and how do we create or develop a positive belief system in them?

1. **Methods available to Train the Player’s Subconscious**

   - **Encourage the player to use positive thought control, by assisting them to develop a set of positive statements by creating a positive thought plan.**
     This identifies what the player needs to be thinking at training, key stages in the build up to and breaks during a game. Studies suggest that there is a direct correlation between time and anxiety/worry. The more time a rugby player has to think, the more time they have to allow negative thoughts to enter their mind. Coaches need to work with the player to plan that time and use positive thought control to fill in the gaps. Each player needs to be encouraged to think of more reasons why he will succeed, than reasons why he might fail. If he does so, then his chances of success of increases exponentially.

   - **Have the player use Positive Affirmation.**
     One way to change a player’s negative thoughts before training or before a game is to re-focus the mind onto something positive, by using an affirmation. Simply have the player repeat a few words over and over again for 5-10 minutes before a game or during difficult training. Alternatively, he may sing a few lines of a song that he likes or use a mantra. This does two things; it focuses the mind onto the positive, and it prevents negative thoughts being programmed in.

     When I was training to become a Wallaby and even when I ultimately played test match rugby I always used the ‘Rolling Stones’ classic “Start Me Up” as
my positive affirmation, because my role was open side flanker and my job was to be at as many breakdowns first as is humanly possible, and force a turnover or secure possession if we had the ball. The stones classic says:

“If you start me up
If you start me up I'll never stop
If you start me up
If you start me up I'll never stop
I've been running hot
You got me ticking gonna blow my top
If you start me up
If you start me up I'll never stop

I used the words ‘I’ll never stop” whenever I felt like stopping in my individual training which involved countless hours of private endurance running, and in my preparation for games and during matches. I found that it enabled me to keep going even under enormous stress or pressure.

- **Self-Talk**

  If an player notices that his inner voice is becoming negative towards himself or others, he should simply say to himself, "Cancel!" and rephrase the negative into a positive statement. Our belief system is built on what we say to ourselves regularly, so a player should make all self-talk positive.

- **Visualization**

  Players need to visualise regularly the exact result they want to achieve in their games, for this creates positive 'programs' within the player’s mind for his body to follow. This technique is an important tool for players who are seeking to improve their rugby.

  Encourage the player to visualize his perfect game daily for 10 minutes and using all his senses eg: he can imagine the smell of the pitch, hear the crowd, etc. This is often best done just prior to going to sleep. The player is to imagine the game in his mind and his role in that game and see himself executing his role perfectly.

  For the player to make his visualization totally effective, he must tailor it to suit his needs perfectly, and the most important aspect of this is his next game. During the weeks before each game, the player should vividly imagine playing a great game at that very ground, seeing it all as if it was truly happening right here and now. This is also known as 'mental rehearsal' - and this sets up a mental blueprint for the player’s body to follow, as soon the player runs onto that field that he has been visualizing.

  When one game finishes, immediately begin visualizing the next one.
recognize that for some players the timing of this exercise was important. Ian Lynagh, Psychologist put the Queensland Squad through a visualization exercise just prior to playing Taranaki in 1980 in New Zealand. Whilst the exercise of itself was useful, the timing was wrong as it was in the team warm-up. For the Queensland forwards, all we could visualize was that if we didn’t get off the gym floor where Ian had us laying on our backs, we would get annihilated!

- **Mental Projection**

  The Player needs to mentally project himself at training to the next game he is going to play i.e. he needs to mentally rehearse during his actual training, the exact experience he wishes to occur at his next game.

- **Consistent Positive Focus each Training Session**

  Encourage the Player at each training session to focus on the positives he can get out of it, irrespective of the conditions – whether it is cold, windy and rainy, wet pitch etc.

  If the player puts in a solid, consistent and enthusiastic practice session each day, as much as possible - his subconscious will record it for his future matches and he will be able to rely on it when it is needed. Encourage each player to consider each training session as an extra suit of armour to go into battle with.

- **Review and Preview Daily**

  Have your players review and then preview their day ahead of them. Before sleeping, they should sit for about half an hour to reflect on their activities each day by:

  **First**, writing down where improvements and advances were made. Put all the positive activities of the day on a sheet of paper.

  **Second**, on another page write where one erred, so the errors may be corrected. It is however important to then tear up the page into pieces, and flush it down the drain or burn it, so that the player does not dwell on those errors and gets ‘stuck’.

  **Third**, read number one over at least three times to reinforce the positive actions in their life.

  **Fourth**, plan their next day with significant activities for the body, mind, and spirit before they go to sleep. This allows the mind to prepare for the next day's best outcomes while sleeping. Many a Test Rugby Player will tell you that by the time a test match comes around they have replayed the game in their sleep many times over.
layers to become more conscious of their actions which in turn gives them more control over

- **Use Routines**

Encourage players to have a built-in routine, or ritual, which he follows for all training days and all games - regardless of their importance.

Routines (especially the ones that bring you great results) can often help to make you feel more comfortable before a big game - as they can help overcome some of the nerves which go with these events. Routines help to make games feel 'familiar' - even if you are playing at an unfamiliar ground and surrounded by people you have never met.

Feeling comfortable is an important ingredient in a player’s mental preparation, because if he feels tense from his surroundings, it can affect his results.

### 2. Creating, implementing and maintaining a positive belief system

Successful sportsmen and women have the following common attributes:

(a) They set short and long term goals  
(b) They truly believe in themselves and the possibility of the goals they have set  
(c) They are prepared to do whatever work is necessary to obtain success  
(d) They do most of their training in the shadows i.e. when no one else is watching.  
(e) They shrug off disappointment and move forward

Coaches need to advise their players that to be successful in rugby, they must honestly examine their beliefs and their mental self-talk. They must be encouraged to discipline their minds to exclusively think of things that will lead to success and exclude all things that will not.

Thinking of success will usually make a person successful. Thinking of failure will make them fail. The bottom line is – a person has to think it before he can achieve it. Success is a state of mind. If we can change the Player’s beliefs, then we can change the outcome.

It is because of player’s belief system that they are where they are in life right now. Players create their success or failure with the beliefs that they have established within themselves.

How do we as coaches assist players to create a positive belief system?
The number of players that fail to realise that the main impediment to the success they seek is a consequence of the limits they have placed on themselves subconsciously, never ceases to amaze me.

Players need to be encouraged to think of themselves as unlimited, unstoppable, unbeatable, supreme and all-powerful.

- Extract the Positives Out of Every training Session

Players need to consider every day a perfect day to train or play. It doesn't matter what the conditions are.

- Use Positive Affirmation

If the player has done the work, he should be encouraged to re-affirm this internally.

- Value Your Own Opinion of Yourself

Players must never let anyone else’s opinion of them be more important than their own.

When people say “You Can’t” – the player needs to understand what they are really saying and turn it around to “I can – but they (the person who spoke the negative) can’t.”

As an open side flanker who was 85 kg and 180 cm, I had many people tell me that I was too small to play for Queensland or the Wallabies. After a First XV match I played in whilst at school, I was approached by an old man who told me I would never go further than schoolboys rugby! I politely but firmly informed him that I would never allow people such as him to limit my aspirations, and felt sorry for him that he had obviously limited his, for someone who had not, would never talk that way.

Whenever I failed to make teams, I would train even harder and mentally picture the old man and use him as my motivation to press on.

As the old saying goes, “If you don’t belief in yourself, don’t expect anyone else to.”

If someone has a limited belief system about a player’s ability, the player must realise that it is THE PLAYER who chooses to either adopt that belief system or reject it. In short, the only limits we have are the ones that we impose upon ourselves, even if they originate from third parties.
Doubts and fears are only thoughts, and they can be overcome by players increasing their own belief, confidence and personal power. Players need to consider themselves to be completely in control of their own thoughts, and that they are “unstoppable”. They need to stay with their own positive thoughts, and surround themselves with positive people.

- **Never focus on Your Competitors**

A Player needs to maintain an unshakeable concentration and focus on himself – why focus on something you cannot control? The main way for a player to keep the focus on himself is to practice on a daily basis mentally being ‘the only player on the pitch’, each and every time you play. Forget that the other players even exist, and don't allow your consciousness to leave your own game, not even for a moment.

Get the player to remind himself with diary notes and constant reminders before and during each match that his game is the only one he is going to think about, and that anything else is an uncontrollable. He needs to begin reminding himself of this one week before the game begins, right up until the last minute of the game, making a point of this until it becomes his automatic way of thinking.

- **Never dwell on negative results.**

Negative beliefs cause the same negative result to recur, over and over. A negative belief starts out as a simple negative thought, which is dwelled upon for some time. This repeated thought creates a new belief or ‘program’ within the subconscious for the body to follow. The subconscious then gathers more and more ‘evidence’ that this belief is true, which strengthens the belief even further.

It is therefore critical to extract the positives from the experience and move on. A positive can simply be identifying the area of the game that the team fell down on, so that it can be rectified at training.

- **Genuinely Look forward to the Game**

Players should be encouraged to allow positive feelings of confidence, anticipation and even a general feeling of happiness to fill their mind and body before a game. This is a far better preparation for a strong performance.

- **Understand the difference between a Wish and a Want.**

It is only the truly dedicated rugby players who will do whatever it takes to achieve success. It very quickly sorts out the serious rugby players from the ones who just wish they were better, but are not willing to do anything about it. You have to MAKE IT HAPPEN not just wish it would happen.
KPIs

new achievable goals in each of our players’
must make a commitment with their team-
mates to reach them eg: ‘to make at least 15 effective tackles’, ‘to force 3 turnovers’

etc. As these goals are reached, the player’s level of confidence grows, which

positively influences his self belief system. The coach can change the focus each

week onto a different particular aspect of their game, and individualize it so that each

player has their own KPIs to reach.

Summary

The most potent weapon a player can possess in their armory is a powerful,

unquenchable belief in themselves. It can single handedly overcome a competitor with

superior ability, technique and physical strength - and all because it originates from

the subconscious mind, the control center of all human movement.

So often we see enormously talented payers fall by the wayside because they lack the

belief in their own ability, and fail to perform when it counts most.

The key thing is to help players achieve sustainable change. The aim is to help the

player change for the better, become confident and independent. This may mean as a

coach devoting time to see susceptible rugby players individually on a regular basis

and implement and monitor programs such as those mentioned in this paper and

others that are available.

The goal in the long term is for the player to recognize that ultimately he is

responsible for himself and the outcomes. Ideally, he becomes his own sport

psychologist.

The coach is an important agent of change. He will be aware of the changes the

player is making and he needs to support this on a daily basis.

There is little future in being physically fit but mentally weak.