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Unlocking the secret to South Sydney Rabbitohs' success

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Moments before the South Sydney Rabbitohs' historic season win on Sunday were two very different locker room atmospheres.

In one, balls were thrown, tackles practiced, a nervous energy dominating TV images of the Bulldogs' changing room. In the other, relative calm as players sat in a semi-circle of chairs – a team whose energy, at that crucial point, appeared to be focused on the mind.

The men were putting their "mind resilience training" practice to use, tapping into a secret weapon that has, for the first time, contributed to an NRL training stratagem, giving Rabbitohs players an armoury of tools to help conquer distractions, anxiety and pressure. The pioneering program, known as OutOfYourMind, has been so successful that head coach Michael Maguire has confirmed that he will be using the techniques in next season's training regime.

"We lifted performance through mind training. I knew that more focus in that area would give us a strength and it definitely did," Maguire told Fairfax Media. "It had a significant impact on most players' ability."

The approach, a combination of breathing, mind and body exercises, was devised by consumer psychologist Derek Leddie and Sam Graham, who has a PhD in learning and communication. The ink on their new training program was barely dry when South Sydney approached them in January, looking for a "non wishy-washy" way to help instil resilience in the team.

"The Souths made it to preliminary finals in the last two years and they've faulted. I asked the coach, 'Alongside players lifting weights and practicing on-field skills, how many hours a week do they spend training the mind?'" said Leddie.

"Obviously not enough," came the reply.

The program, which started in February, included a range of exercises and 12 tools that helped players understand what stress levels boost their performance, taught them how to be present and expanded their comfort zones. For the last five months players have been meditating as a group for 20 minutes, three times a week.

"The mind can be an incredibly inefficient machine or it can be the most focused laser beam," said Leddie, who was sworn to secrecy until after the big game. "One of the things we teach them is becoming aware of what they react to and how they react. Take the energy of that moment obviously some fairly major things happening inside that player – and put that energy into the next play."

Maguire said one of the key outcomes was a more open and deep communication across the team.

A newcomer to many Australian pitches as well as in corporate settings, the course has to contend with cynicism from more traditional coaching circles. But while mindfulness as a part of everyday training in Australian high performance sports is uncommon compared with the relative dominance of life and psychological coaching, Superbowl winners the Seattle Seahawks have since last year included yoga and meditation in their training regimen. The Chicago Bulls include mindfulness in their routine, as do the Miami Hurricanes and the Los Angeles Lakers.

And with good reason, as studies increasingly suggest strong links between high performance and a mindful approach.

Lianne Tomfohr, assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Calgary, is a mindfulness expert who has seen interest in the field "explode" in recent years. She said research has shown that basketball players who practice meditation are more likely to make successful free throws, and that a benefit of yoga and mindfulness is that individuals can cope with uncomfortable situations better, for longer. In fact, a key mind tool, visualisation, can elicit the same emotions as if the action was really being made. Visualise yourself kicking a ball perfectly, and not only are the same areas of the brain activated as they would be by the physical action, but the trick can have real effects on technique.

In Sydney, Leddie puts much of the pioneering approach's success down to the Souths' indomitable coach and the culture

he has created within the club.

"Madge is a pretty tough taskmaster and he is not going to put up with stuff that feels good but doesn't do much," he said.

"He brought something in that probably felt slightly uncomfortable for many of the players, but he saw the benefits and continued the support of it," said Leddie, who admits he knew little about the NRL world until this year. "I imagine he's a bit of a rare breed in that space."

Maguire appears on a video on the OutOfYourMind website, extolling the virtues of techniques that are "as important, if not more important than other facets of what we're practicing, whether it be out on the field, in the gym," he says.

"You know the mind is a very strong, powerful muscle."

Alongside him, players including Clive Churchill medal winner, Sam Burgess, his brother Tom, Luke Keary and Lote Tuqiri appear on film in meditation poses, converts to the new approach.

"We've been able to stay calm, maybe when we were on a real high and we've scored a few tries, to bring us back down to the base, to stay nice and humble and to control our emotions a bit better," Sam said of the course.

Dr Kate Edwards, a lecturer in exercise physiology at the University of Sydney whose past research includes work with the Rabbitohs, said she had not encountered mindfulness training in Australian elite sport but that it is important to think about process rather than the final score in such a highly charged environment.

"Mindfulness very often focuses on the breath to be able to clear the mind. We know that when players focus on the outcome, they often choke."

Whether or not it was down to their suite of mindfulness tools, "choke" is no way to describe the bunnies' storming season win.

Key tools

Lianne Tomfohr, PhD, shares five key mindfulness tools that may help any sportsperson – and us all:

1. "If you find yourself getting distracted, bring your attention to your breath. Even if it is just for one breath, that's the best way to refocus."
2. "Focus on the values you embody. The reason these players are doing these sports is because they love it – it's obviously about winning but a lot of it is about playing the best you can for something you have prepared your whole life for. Be the best you can be for those few minutes."
3. "When emotions are high, notice your breath. You can watch your emotion go from a really intense level to dissipating this is called 'riding the wave'."
4. "Your senses help you to feel present. Notice sounds, the feelings you might have on your skin, the feeling under your feet if you're walking. Sometimes I just say to my clients, 'What colour is my shirt?' It forces them to stop being in their head and just look at what's around them."
5. "Visualise. This is great for technique, but also great for relaxation. If you can really think about your favourite beach, it can elicit the same emotions as if you were actually there. The same is true of visualising negative situations."

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/rugby-league/league-news/unlocking-the-secret-to-south-sydney-rabbitohs-success-20141010-10re5k.html>