FEAR OF FAILURE AND COPING STRATEGIES IN YOUTH FOOTBALL

BY BRADLEY BUSCH AND DR MATT PAIN
Football academies were introduced into English football in 1998, following Howard Wilkinson’s ‘Charter for Quality’. A decade later, the Lewis Review was commissioned by The FA, Premier League and Football League to examine the current state of youth football in England. The review suggested that youth footballers face a particularly stressful time when challenging for a first-team place. Teams are currently spending more money than ever before on talent from abroad, £277 million in the 2006-07 season alone. Managers are under increasing pressure to get instant as well as long-term success (the average tenure of a dismissed manager has decreased from 3.12 years in 1992-93, to 1.89 years in 2006-07). This has resulted in fewer opportunities for home-grown players. Middlesbrough chairman Steve Gibson recently stated that the chances of an academy player breaking through into the first team were ‘about one in a hundred’.

The Lewis Review also stated that a climate of fear exists within youth football. Former England Head Coach Sven-Göran Eriksson stated that ‘an athlete often has a great deal more potential than he manages to use, but his fear of failing locks him into his performance cage’. Indeed, Newcastle and England midfielder Joey Barton attributed his performance following his call-up to the England national side to being ‘too scared of failing’.

Despite the apparent presence of the fear of failure phenomenon, no research to date has examined it within football. Fear of failure has been principally studied in both academic and business domains. It is stated that failure itself is not feared, but the negative consequences that are perceived to follow it. Five main aversive consequences to failure that exist are (a) experiencing shame and embarrassment, (b) devaluing one’s self-estimate, (c) having an uncertain future, (d) upsetting important others, and (e) important others losing interest. Fear of failure has been associated with increased stress, reduced performance, cheating, drop-out and unstable self-esteem.

We interviewed youth footballers to see how they defined success and failure, what they saw as the consequences of these and how they coped with fear of failure. The footballers in this study reported that they defined success as a desirable match outcome (i.e. winning), personal satisfaction (i.e. playing to a high personal level) and receiving recognition and acknowledgement (i.e. trophies and awards). Failure on the other hand, was defined as an undesirable match-outcome, not performing well and not receiving any recognition/acknowledgement.

It follows then that when trying to motivate a large group of players, by focusing exclusively on one definition of success (i.e. exclusively results-orientated), this will not strike a chord with some of the players. As the emphasis on youth football should be on player development, a balanced view of success is best. Likewise, a range of consequences that were perceived to follow success included enhanced social status, enhanced perception of self and tangible gains amongst others. Where possible, those working with youth footballers are encouraged to find out which consequences individuals believe follow a success, which are most important to them, and then use this to encourage and motivate them in future endeavours.

81 male footballers aged 16-19 completed a fear of failure questionnaire. Results from this show that shame and embarrassment was the most pronounced fear, followed by upsetting important others, having an uncertain future, important others losing interest and finally devaluing one’s self-estimate. These results can be seen in the table below. No significant differences in the footballers’ fears of failure were apparent based on their age, number of years’ experience playing football, hours spent training per week or the position that they play. It was present in everyone. Coaches are therefore encouraged to construct an environment where failure is not followed by teasing or negative comments from team-mates. By working alongside parents to ensure that they are supportive of their children following a failure, footballers will not be as worried about parental reaction to failure (upsetting important others).
Fear of failure was found to affect the footballers in three distinct ways. First, it had a negative affect on their sporting performance. When fearing failure, footballers stated that they felt they were less likely to take the sort of risks in a match that they usually would and tended to play it safe. An example of such would be goalkeepers being reluctant to come off their line to claim a cross or corner. Fear of failure also had a negative affect on their social interactions, leaving them more argumentative and shorter with other people. The final effect was on the footballers' general well-being, e.g. becoming more moody and suffering reduced quality of sleep. Factors contributing to a footballer’s fear of failure include bad performances, the score, time on their own, pressure to succeed (from parents and themselves), opponent reputation and making future plans.

The final part of this study examined the coping strategies that footballers use to deal with their fears of failure. The most frequent strategy was avoidance – that is disengaging from the source of stress. These included pushing thoughts of failure away, not talking about their fears and trying to think about other things. Though this has some potential short-term advantages, as it allows performers to block out any negative thoughts and focus on the task at hand, it has long term negative consequences as it does not address the root of the problem, nor the stress that follows it. Emotion- and problem-focused strategies are more positive coping strategies. These included talking about their worries with family members and training harder. Those working with youth athletes are encouraged to help them adopt a more positive coping style which incorporates both problem- and emotion-focused strategies. This includes questioning the rationale/logic of their fears and then working on a way to address the problem.

Summary and Implications

The fear of failure is a very real problem within youth football. It affects athletes in a range of ways and at this present time, athletes appear to be implementing worrying coping strategies to deal with it. One possible explanation is that athletes may believe that by admitting that they have these fears or worries, they are going to appear weak and vulnerable in the eyes of their team-mates and coaches. As such, this issue is not discussed, resulting in a lack of guidance on how to deal with these thoughts. Through coach and parental education, positive coping strategies can be taught to youth footballers. These will help lower their level of fear of failure and reduce the negative effect that it may have on their sporting performance, social interactions and general well-being.

Challenging for a first team place can be stressful time for youth footballers, with an ever increasing exclusive result-orientated approach resulting in a climate of fear. The key as coaches is managing that pressure carefully and dealing in a positive way with any failures - on the training ground as well as in games.

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Summary, Key Suggestions:
1. Try to use a range of definitions for success and failure, i.e. avoid exclusively being results-orientated
2. Find out which consequences each player believes will follow success and use this information to help motivate them
3. Build an environment where failure is not met by laughter/ridicule by team-mates (shame and embarrassment – the highest fear)
4. Get parents on board. Players reported feeling most likely to talk to them about their fears of failure. Important to educate them on how to help their children
5. Encourage positive coping strategies for both failure and fear of failure. This includes both problem-focused (increased effort/training, learning from mistakes, seeking technical advice) and emotion-focused (support from family members and team-mates, turning a negative into a positive). This type of coping has long term player development benefits

Key:
- Deviating Self-Estimate
- Uncertain Future
- Important Others Losing Interest
- Upsetting Important Others
- Shame and Embarrassment