

THE MOST IMPORTANT ORGAN IN AN ATHLETE'S BODY

Speed, strength and stamina are all very well, but they will get you nowhere unless you have a finely tuned brain, says sports psychologist and magician Roberto Forzoni

He's a member of the Magic Circle, a one-time interpreter to England manager Fabio Capello and a former pirate radio DJ – so it's not a total shock that understanding the mind appeals to Roberto Forzoni.

He is one of the country's leading sports psychologists, currently working with a number of GB's London 2012 athletics hopefuls.

London-born of Italian parents, Forzoni was a semi-professional footballer before taking up coaching. It was during a spell at Brentford FC that he had his epiphany.

"I was working with the players on fitness and how to get them to eat better," he says. "I came across this thing called psychology and was struck by how small interventions can have such a big influence."

The club had an ambitious target of 90 points for the season and he witnessed the benefit of goal-setting.

"We lost five matches over Christmas but had 47 points at halfway, so we were on target. Even though we had lost five games on the spin there was a perception that we were still doing well. If we hadn't set that goal it would have been a case of 'We've lost form' instead.

"Many managers and athletes don't like to set goals, but Herb Elliott [1960 Olympic 1500m champion]

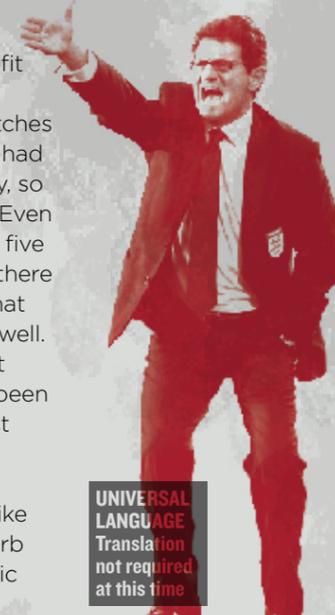
said athletes should be brave enough to define what failure is."

Forzoni had struck upon a new passion and he launched into it, enjoying great success working closely with top football managers – Alans Pardew and Curbishley and Steve Coppell – and later branched into tennis to help two-time Grand Slam finalist Andy Murray. A role at the English Institute of Sport brought him into direct contact with athletics and he now works with Olympic 100m finalist Jeanette Kwakye among others.

He believes that athletics is a sport in which psychology can be critical.

"More people play football than other sports, so they become naturally mentally tough – because if they don't there are 100 people waiting to take their place," he says.

"In athletics, if you are pretty good you haven't got as many



UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE Translation not required at this time

CASE STUDY 001 "I ALWAYS UNDERPERFORM AT MAJOR CHAMPIONSHIPS. HOW CAN I OVERCOME THIS?"

Often what can go through an athlete's mind at a championship is, 'I am under pressure to perform otherwise I will lose my funding.' Or perhaps they don't like competing at a certain venue or against a certain competitor.

"Underperformance often happens because they are not replicating in competition what they do in training. A lot of athletes feel that when they go to a big competition they need to do a little bit extra – but often this is impossible. Their

training performance might be a seven out of 10; at a championship they expect a nine. But then they achieve a six or a five because they are thinking, 'It's just not happening.'

"What I try to get athletes to do is to replicate their training performance. That's usually good enough, because the adrenaline of a big event helps lift the performance.

"Paul Annacone, Tim Henman's former coach, used to say, 'I want to see players perform averagely well.'

"A starting point would be: if you think you are doing the right thing in training, just replicate that in a big championship. You can then get into this scenario: you put so much effort into your training that going to a big championship can only be a pleasure.

"I can accept an athlete being nervous, uncomfortable, at a championship, but I ask them, 'Would you rather be somewhere else?' If the answer is no, I tell them that pressure is a privilege."

"PRO ATHLETES SHOULD BE BRAVE ENOUGH TO DEFINE WHAT FAILURE IS"

CASE STUDY 002 "I AM CONSTANTLY INJURED. HOW CAN YOU HELP LIFT MY SPIRITS?"

It's a difficult situation to deal with. Athletes with persistent injuries train as hard, often harder, than other athletes and can become very down.

"As a rule, athletes have to accept injuries as part and parcel of the sport – particularly if they overtrain – and that they can get injured through no fault of their own.

"I would advise injured athletes to follow the physio's schedule. From

a psychologist's point of view I would reinforce what the experts say: encourage them to stick to it and not get ahead of themselves.

"What you can do is work on different strategies. Imagery, for one. You can take an athlete through scenarios of what can go wrong. It is really useful for them to look at different situations and how they can deal with them.

"You ask them to use very detailed imagery

and 'run' through a race 10 times, getting them to concentrate on their body position, breathing, stride length and visualising tactics. It's about improving self-awareness.

"With an injured athlete you have a great deal of opportunity to increase their mental strength. They may not physically be able to compete and train, but they can increase their mental strength – and this really appeals to athletes."

ROBERTO FORZONI CURRICULUM VITAE

Age 50

Born London

Job Sports psychologist/football coach

FOOTBALL

Charlton (1997-99 & 2009)

Invited to help first team squad

Crystal Palace (1999-2001) Performance coach

The FA (2000-08) Consultant/psychology courses

Brentford (2001-03) First team coach

Brighton (2003-04) First team coach

West Ham (2005-08) Performance consultant

Fulham (2005-09) Consultant

Southampton (2009) Consultant

TENNIS

Lawn Tennis Association (2007-)

National performance psychology manager

OTHER SPORTS

English Institute of Sport (2005-07)

Performance psychologist

STARS WORKED WITH

Football Robert Green, Nigel Reo-Coker

& Yossi Benayoun Tennis Andy Murray &

Laura Robson Athletics Jeanette Kwakye

& Harry Aikines-Aryeetey



CASE STUDY 003

"I ALWAYS SEEM TO LOSE TO A PARTICULAR RIVAL. WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?"

This is where the focus becomes the wrong focus for the athlete. If you are consistently losing to an athlete it very soon becomes a mental issue.

"For example, for a tennis player who doesn't want to play against a Russian or a South American because the perception is that they are tough or strong – that perception becomes the reality.

"The thing is, though, you can't control your opponent and you can't

control the sport. All you can affect is your race, your game. All you can bring into play are the controllable factors.

"Choosing to focus on your rival is the wrong approach. What you need to do is to focus on the strategy. You've got to look at what's important to you, not at what's happened before. And what's important to you is to get a good start out of the blocks, to get good acceleration and to maintain that to the

end. It's irrelevant what your opponents do.

"Thinking about errors is a big mistake – as is making the generalisation that they always happens.

"Another thinking error is an absolute, like: 'I must win this race.' There are no musts in that sense.

"What you *must* do is give your best and do the right things. The right things are to focus on your race, carry out the right training and execute your game plan.

"LOOK AT WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO YOU, NOT AT WHAT'S HAPPENED BEFORE"

people pushing you. You can reach the top on good technique. You don't have to be mentally tough necessarily."

Which is why improvements to the mental approach can make such a difference, and psychology can be so effective.

Forzoni uses his magic tricks as part of his mental training: "There's a lot of downtime in athletics, or any sport," he explains. "Sometimes you show the athletes some magic and you see their amazement. When they go out and compete they will

believe you because they have seen you do something remarkable."

Talking of neat tricks, **SPIKES** would like to hear how he became Capello's interpreter?

"It was on a FIFA Pro-Licence course about five years ago," he explains. "The original interpreter got a bit nervous and pulled out when he realised the likes of Sir Alex Ferguson would be there. They then looked down the list of names, picked me out as probably being Italian and asked me to do it. I was very nervous, but I have always said that new experiences are good experiences."

TESTIMONIAL 001

HARRY AIKINES-ARYEETAY

EUROPEAN UNDER-23 100M CHAMPION & WORLD JUNIOR 100M CHAMPION

"He shows me how to believe that I can do all the things that I want to do. He works a lot with motivational videos and visualisation. He's just an amazing person and I really get on with him. He's very energized, very funny and minimises things that seemed quite stressful."



TESTIMONIAL 002

JEANETTE KWAKYE

2008 OLYMPIC 100M FINALIST

"He makes you really understand why psychology can help. He was very good on the motivational side. I remember he made a video of my training and it was quite inspiring. He helped me when I was down. He lifted my spirits and helped me become more independent at sorting out my problems."

