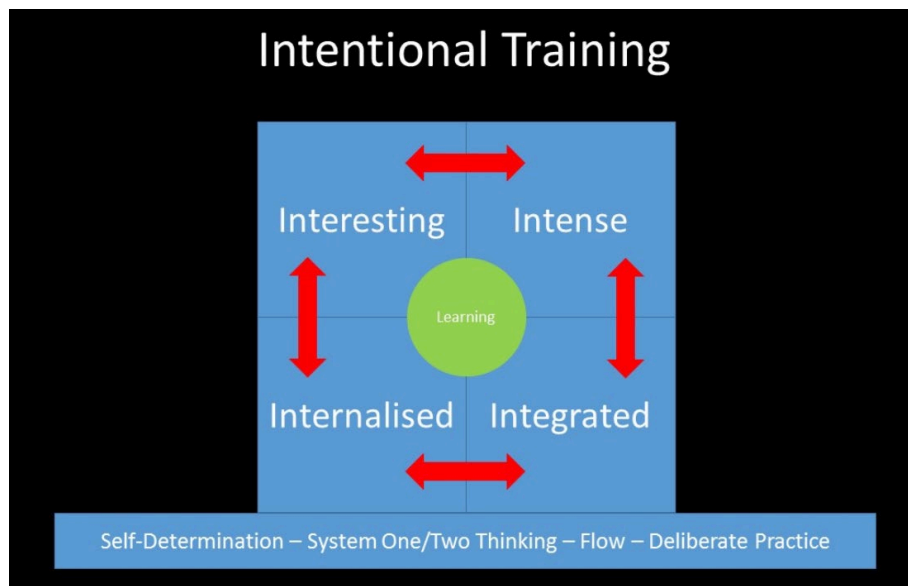




Players Must Train with Intention

By Dan Abrahams



Soccer players must train with intention. They must walk out onto the training pitch with a mind focused on improving. They must engage their brain so the skills they're learning stick...and stick hard! This sounds obvious right? This sounds like something every footballer would do. But in my experience this doesn't necessarily happen. Too often footballers are willing and able to train with physical intensity, but lack the kind of mental intensity that helps them develop skill.

Let me be clear, it is mental intensity and NOT physicality during training that will separate a player from his or her peers. It isn't good enough to just train with physical intensity. That won't re-wire your brain to learn the kind of skills you need to be the very best you can be.

"I trained hard" shouldn't mean that you ran about a lot. Training hard should mean that you set yourself a goal to improve a specific area of your game. It should mean that you found a way during your training session to improve this specific skill. It should mean that it felt uncomfortable as you worked on this skill – you risked looking stupid, you risked failure.

That's what intentional training is – it's specific, it's uncomfortable, it's risky. It's mental intensity...

I'll give you an example. You're right footed and you want to improve your left foot. So during a small sided or keep ball game you decide to pass with your left foot every single time you get on the ball. You have to adjust your body position to receive the ball in this way. You have to be aware of the players around you that you can pass to using your left foot. That will be uncomfortable...it will be risky.

You see, players who train with intention are no excuse players. They don't wait for their coaches to tell them what to do. They don't moan or groan about training because they're too busy getting the very most out of each and every session no matter what.

So if you're a player reading this I urge you to train intentionally. If you're a coach I invite you to help your players to train with intensity.

Things have to change.

Soccer players must take charge of their training. They must own it. They must walk onto the pitch with a plan in mind – one they've made themselves, one that is self-driven, and one that they can keenly reflect upon at the end of the training session.

Too many soccer players train passively. They let their coaches take charge of their development. They train for training sakes. They think just because they've turned up they're going to get better.

Nothing could be further from the truth. To improve in soccer you have to practice on purpose. You have to train with intention.

This neatly introduces my Intentional Training Model. It's a model for players to learn how to learn and how to develop skill.

Intentional training consists of four main components – interesting, intense, internalised and integrated.

In short, players need to make training interesting for themselves – it must absorb their focus. To do this they have to set stretch goals for themselves. Training must also be intense – not just physically intense must mentally too. Training must be internalised – as in players must self-reflect as they practice their game. And finally, training must be integrated with feedback from their coaches.

Intentional training is interesting, intense, internalised and integrated.

The model is underpinned by four theories of learning, thinking and being – self-determination, system one/two thinking, flow and deliberate practice.

Over the coming weeks I'm going to talk more about this model for players – I'm going to bring it alive for you. I'll also discuss the theories that underpin the model.

“Ok, I want to train to the best of my ability today. The most important thing is I train to learn...I train to improve...”

How am I going to do this?

I have to make my training INTENTIONAL – this means it has to be interesting, intense, integrated and internalised.

What does this mean?

Interesting and intense – I need to set a goal to grab my focus of attention. I need to make this session interesting. I'm going to work on using my left foot more. So I'm going to try to receive the ball more often with a different body shape so I can control the ball and pass with my left foot.

By doing this I'm going to make the training session intense. It's intense, not just physically but mentally because I'm taking a risk. I'm coming out of my comfort zone by receiving the ball and passing with my left foot. It's going to feel uncomfortable, it may be ugly, but that's ok. I have to deal with that. I have to try to improve every training session.

Integrated – I have to strive to get some feedback from the coaches about this goal. I will also ask them to spot anything else they see that I can improve. That third eye will help me be more aware of my current ability to play with my left foot. It will help me strive to improve it even more.

Internalised – as I'm training I need to self-reflect in the moment – am I getting this right? How can I do this even better? Is my body shape correct? Does my first touch allow me to play a pass with my left foot? Am I striking the ball confidently with my left?

I have to take charge of my training. It's not up to my coaches, it's up to me. I am responsible, it's about me. I can't rely on my coaches to do it for me, I have to drive my training mindset. I have to train intentionally.”