

HOW TO BE MENTALLY TOUGH AT ALL LEVELS OF PLAY

By Warren Barton

THE USWNT'S MENTAL TOUGHNESS

The U.S. Women's National Team must have mental toughness going into the tournament. They must be prepared to go the distance, face adversity, face the pressure of being one of the tournament favorites. And they need to bear the weight of the nation expecting them to win. The whole country's behind them. And while that can help them feel confident, it can also be an added pressure and a burden sometimes.

But, I know Coach Jill Ellis and I know some of the girls personally, and they relish that pressure.

I think some people can be suffocated by it, but these girls really embrace it and have fun. People like Sydney Leroux and other strong characters need to come forward and embrace that environment of pressure and adversity.

They need to be mentally prepared going into every game, knowing what's at stake. They need to be prepared defensively, but also knowing that going forward that they're expected to score goals, and if they do that, and go on the ascendency, they can make a statement in the tournament early on and gain momentum and confidence, and fear factor in the opposition.

ALEX MORGAN'S MENTAL TOUGHNESS

The nation has high expectations. They've waited for Alex to come along and blossom.

She's had 1 or 2 injuries and she's come back and she looks strong and she looks hungry. That shows she has mental toughness.

And I think there are some things she needs to do when she prepares. She needs to speak to people like Abby who have had those expectations on their shoulders for such a long time. And she can't get caught up in the moment.

There's a great line from Chicharito when he was playing for Real Madrid in a game against Athletic Madrid. He missed 3 or 4 opportunities and he said he got amnesia. He just forgot all about it.

I think Alex has to do that. If she has a down point in the game, which everyone does, she can't let it get the best of her. Her mental toughness has to be there, she has to enjoy the moment, embrace what she is, look forward to the game and respect her teammates. I think if she does that, with her team and with her quality of play, she will have a long and successful tournament.

HOW YOUNG KIDS CAN BUILD MENTAL TOUGHNESS

You have to build the right expectations. You have to believe in yourself. If you do, it changes the mentality from not just being a player, but being the best player you can be.

Believing in yourself applies to all aspects of your preparation—when you're training by yourself, when you're training with your team, and when you're looking forward to every game.

I've played with some of the best players in the world, and even with the pressure of the game at the highest level, *they enjoyed it*. As a kid growing up playing the game, you have to enjoy what you're doing. Don't be in awe of it, don't be in fear of it. Because if you have that fear, you're not going to embrace it and enjoy it.

Your physical conditioning is important as well because if you work on your technique and ability and you're physically ready, chances are you're going to be mentally ready as well.

You don't want to have any distractions in your mind or that thought of "if only." That's a phrase that's been in the fray of the NBA, NFL and of course in soccer. You don't want to leave that doubt in your mind, you want to be fully prepared, and what will be will be. And normally, that's good things.