

# The Trials of Torres

Before he finally broke his Chelsea drought, it was starting to look like Fernando Torres would become the most expensive goose to never lay a golden egg. We spoke to Sydney sports psychologist Gareth J. Mole about the fickle issue of confidence and performance.



Gareth J. Mole is head of sport psychology at Condor Performance and a member of the Australian Psychological Society.

While the experience of Fernando Torres - the world's most expensive player - might be millions of dollars removed from that of your mere mortal footballer, there are some lessons to be gained for those who play at a less illustrious level.

But don't expect to find these lessons in the realm of pop psychology, warns the head of sport and performance psychology at Condor Performance, Gareth J. Mole.

Mole said the gaining and keeping of confidence was about far more than just a matter of being positive.

"It's definitely not by being optimistic — you can leave that for bumper stickers, that's pop psychology, which is a complete waste of time," Mole says.

He said Torres was a high profile example of the dreaded striker's curse of the goal drought, but he cautioned that not knowing the full details of the Torres situation meant any conclusions about his case would be merely guesswork.

"What will be happening in the Torres example is that everybody in the world will be suggesting that basically a striker is measured by the number of goals they score," he says.

"That is fundamentally wrong because you can't control the number of goals that you score — a variety of factors are involved in scoring goals and these can include things such as opposition, conditions and teammates."

What counts most, says Mole, is for players to measure effort rather than results: "You can control your efforts whereas you can only influence your results."

And that's something that

applies to all sports and all levels of play, whether you are a star Spanish striker or a Sunday league hacker: statistics such as number of goals scored need to be considered in the context of broader performance factors.

"It's quite possible for an athlete to accrue their very best statistics while performing poorly and it's also possible to accrue some pretty poor outcome statistics while performing well."

Mole says athletes have to focus on what they can do about a situation, and this controllable factor almost always comes back to the effort they put in.

"What has to happen, and this is what mentally tough people do naturally, and what we help people do who want to improve their mental toughness, is that the entire focus needs to shift to effort, which is completely controllable.

"Even if you are injured you can do things like visualisation on the correct technique or the technique you want to improve on. So it doesn't matter if everyone in the world has got it wrong and are implying or telling you in no uncertain terms that if you don't score goals you're in all sorts of trouble — as long as in your own head you are putting in the right quality and quantity of effort, which is something you can control."

He says the problem with focusing on results was that it distracted athletes from the fundamentals of their game, the very things that would eventually bring results. This focus on results could be counter-productive in terms of actually achieving consistently good results and could lead to what he called 'rollercoasting'.

"Rollercoasting is what happens when people are obsessed by results, in essence they are putting in maximum effort but they are so convinced that results are a controllable that then when the results aren't coming they reverse their effort, change their technique or just sulk."

"They then go through a lull until they get lucky, score a couple of goals and they think everything is fine and they go through a peak again.

"You can apply that to virtually any sport, so you get these peaks and troughs because of the focus on outcome goals or results and from a consistency point of view that's the death rattle — you don't perform well over a season or even a four-day golf event if you are rollercoasting."

So whether you've just had a Russian oligarch pay a small fortune for your services or have a kick around every Monday night at your local Futsal centre, the best thing to do if you're having a rough patch is forget about scoring goals and work hard on the controllable factors, such as technique and fitness, that will help you score goals.

And leave the 'stay positive' slogans to the Oprah Winfrey crowd. **SI**

