**TOUGHNESS IN SOCCER**

“They were two strong men, these oddly different generals, and they represented the strengths of two conflicting currents that, through them, had come into final collision. Back of Robert E. Lee was the notion that the old aristocratic concept might somehow survive and be dominant in American life. Lee was tidewater Virginia, and in his background were family, culture, and tradition.... Grant, the son of a tanner on the Western frontier, was everything Lee was not. He had come up the hard way and embodied nothing in particular except the **eternal toughness** and sinewy fiber of the men who grew up beyond the mountains. He was one of a body of men who owed reverence and obeisance to no one, who were self-reliant to a fault, **who cared hardly anything for the past but who had a sharp eye for the future.”** --Bruce Catton

“Then, in almost coordinated fashion, I would watch games and see player upon player thumping his chest after a routine play, angrily taunting an opponent after a scored goal, getting into a shouting match with an opposing player, or squaring up nose-to-nose as if a fight might ensue. I see players jawing at each other, trying to "intimidate" other players. What a waste of time. That is nothing more than fake toughness, and it has no real value.” --Jay Bilas

**“When talent is combined with aggression and intensity then potential is reached.”**

--Diego Simeone (Athletico Madrid)

No examination of toughness would be complete without considering the dictionary definition of the word. The most common definition of “tough” is being able to withstand great force without tearing or breaking. In other words, **something that is tough is strong and resilient.**

In metallurgy—the science of metallic elements—toughness is a measure of how much energy a material can absorb before rupturing. Scientists have devised ways to measure a metal’s toughness through lab impact tests, such as swinging a hammer from a pendulum at a metal object to calculate how much energy is required to break the object.

In technical terms, toughness is a descriptor of how much energy a material can absorb before breaking. For example, if a material withstands a great deal of energy before breaking, then it is a tough material even if it bends and changes shape in the process.

Hardness—in metallurgy, at least—is related to toughness, but it’s not the same thing. Hardness describes how much energy it takes to bend or change a material. If the material takes a lot of energy to change only a little, it is saidt to be hard. Conversely, if the material changes shape without much energy, then the material is not hard. Glass, for instance, is hard because it takes energy to change its shape, but it breaks easily, so it’s not very tough. Rubber, on the other hand, isn’t usually hard. In some cases, we can call it soft. It bends and changes shape much more easily than glass, but it take more energy to break it. So rubber is tough.

These same terms are often used to describe people. We are hard or soft, tough or weak, but those qualities are harder to define and measure when applied to human beings. We all have images in minds of characters that epitomize the classic and stereotypical “tough guy”: Rocky Balboa, Chuck Norris, or Clint Eastwood.

In sports, I think of an Ironman triathlete, a football player like Ray Lewis, a basketball player like Lebron James, or a soccer legend by the name of Zinedine Zidane. In sports, we presume that it’s a positive to be hard, but I believe it’s much more important to be tough, or—in scientific terms—unbreakable.

In fact, I would argue that being able to bend or flex under pressure without breaking is a more important attribute than hardness. An athlete who bends without breaking and bounces back up will prevail over the hard athlete—someone who is resistant to bending under pressure but will break with enough force.

***Toughness has nothing to do with size, physical strength or athleticism****.* Some players may be born tough, but I believe that toughness is a skill, and it is a skill that can be developed and improved. Michigan State coach, Tom Izzo, always says, "Players play, but tough players win." He is right. Here are some of the ways true toughness is exhibited in soccer:

**Talk on defense:** The toughest players talk on defense, and communicate with their teammates. It is almost impossible to talk on defense and not be in a stance, down and ready, with a vision of man and ball. If you talk, you let your teammates know you are there, and make them and yourself better defenders. It also lets your opponent know that you are fully engaged.

**Jump to the ball:** When on defense, the tough defenders move as the ball moves. The toughest players move on the flight of the ball and anticipate, not when it gets to its destination. And the toughest players jump to the ball and meet the ball in flight. Tough players don't let runners run across their face -- they make the runner change his path.

**Run the pitch**: Tough players sprint up and down the pitch, which drags the defense and opens up things for others. Tough players run hard and create easy opportunities through their effort, even though there is nothing easy about them. Tough players don't take tough shots -- they work hard to make them easy.

**Play so hard, your coach has to take you out:** I was a really hard worker in high school and college. But I worked and trained exceptionally hard to make playing easier. I was wrong. I once read that Alex Ferguson had criticized a player of his by saying, "You just want to be comfortable out there!" Well, that was me, and when I read that, it clicked with me. I needed to work to increase my capacity for work, not to make it easier to play. I needed to work in order to be more productive in my time on the pitch. Tough players play so hard that their coaches have to take them out to get rest so they can put them back in. **The toughest players don't pace themselves.**

**Get to your teammate first:** When your teammate lays his body on the line to make a slide tackle on the pitch or lays out for a header, the tough players get to him first to help him back up. If your teammate misses an opportunity on frame, tough players get to him right away. Tough players are also great teammates.

**Take responsibility for your teammates:** Tough players expect a lot from their teammates, but they also put them first. When the bus leaves at 9 a.m., tough players not only get themselves there, but they also make sure their teammates are up and get there, too. Tough players take responsibility for others in addition to themselves. They make sure their teammates eat first, and they give credit to their teammates before taking it themselves.

**Tackle:** The toughest players never shy away from “getting stuck in.” Get in a stance: Tough players don't play straight up and down and put themselves in the position of having to get ready to get ready. Tough players are down in a stance on the balls of their feet with legs staggered and ready to move. Tough players are the aggressor, and the aggressor is in a stance.

**Finish plays:** Tough players don't just get fouled, they get fouled and complete the play. They play until they hear the whistle. They don't give up on a play or assume that a teammate will do it. A tough player plays through to the end of the play and works to finish every play.

**Throw yourself into your team's defense:** A tough player fills his tank on the defensive end, not on offense. A tough player is not deterred by a missed shot. A tough player values his performance first by how well he defended. Defense wins championships!

**Take and give criticism the right way:** Tough players can take criticism without feeling the need to answer back or give excuses. They are open to getting better and expect to be challenged and hear tough things.. Tough players listen and are not afraid to say what other teammates may not want to hear, but need to hear.

**Show strength in your body language:** Tough players project confidence and security with their body language. They do not hang their heads, do not react negatively to a mistake of a teammate, and do not whine and complain to referees. Tough players project strength, and do not cause their teammates to worry about them. Tough players do their jobs, and their body language communicates that to their teammates -- and to their opponents.

**Be alert:** Tough players are not "cool." Tough players are alert and active, and tough players communicate with teammates so that they are alert, too. Tough players echo commands until everyone is on the same page. They understand the best teams play eleven as one. Tough players are alert in transition offensively and defensively. Tough players don't just run back to find a man—they sprint back to stop the ball, to get organize, and to protect the goal.

**Concentrate, and encourage your teammates to concentrate:** Concentration is a skill, and tough players work hard to concentrate whenever they are on the pitch. Tough players go as hard as they can for as long as they can.

**It's not your shot; it's our shot:** Tough players don't take bad shots, and they certainly don't worry about getting "my" shots. Tough players work for good shots and understand that it is not "my" shot, it is "our" shot. Tough players celebrate when "we" score.

**Take responsibility for your actions:** Tough players make no excuses. They take responsibility for their actions. "That was my responsibility -- I should have had that." No excuses. Shouldering the responsibility. That's toughness.

**Look your coaches and teammates in the eye:** Tough players never drop their heads. They always look coaches and teammates in the eye, because if they are talking, it is important to them and to you.

**Move on to the next play:** Tough players don't waste time celebrating a good play or lamenting a bad one. They understand that soccer is too fast a game to waste time and opportunities with celebratory gestures or angry reactions. Tough players move on to the next play. They know that the most important play in any game is the next one.

**Be hard to play against, and easy to play with:** Tough players make their teammates' jobs easier, and their opponents' jobs tougher.

**Make every game important:** Tough players don't categorize opponents and games. They know that if they are playing, it is important. Tough players understand that if they want to play in championship games, ***they must treat every game as a championship game.***

**Make getting better every day your goal:** Tough players come to work every day to get better, and keep their horizons short. They meet victory and defeat the same way: They get up the next day and go to work to be better than they were the day before. Tough players hate losing but are not shaken or deterred by a loss. Tough players enjoy winning but are never satisfied. For tough players, a championship or a trophy is not a goal; it is a destination. **The goal is to get better every day.**

*You may think that by simply reading this handout you will grow your soccer game. That's a nice thought but you would be sadly mistaken. Growing your soccer game is an* ***everyday thing****. It's an* ***every training session thing****, and an* ***every match thing****. It must be done through patience, perseverance, and practice—practice—practice!!*