

Saints training to win mind games

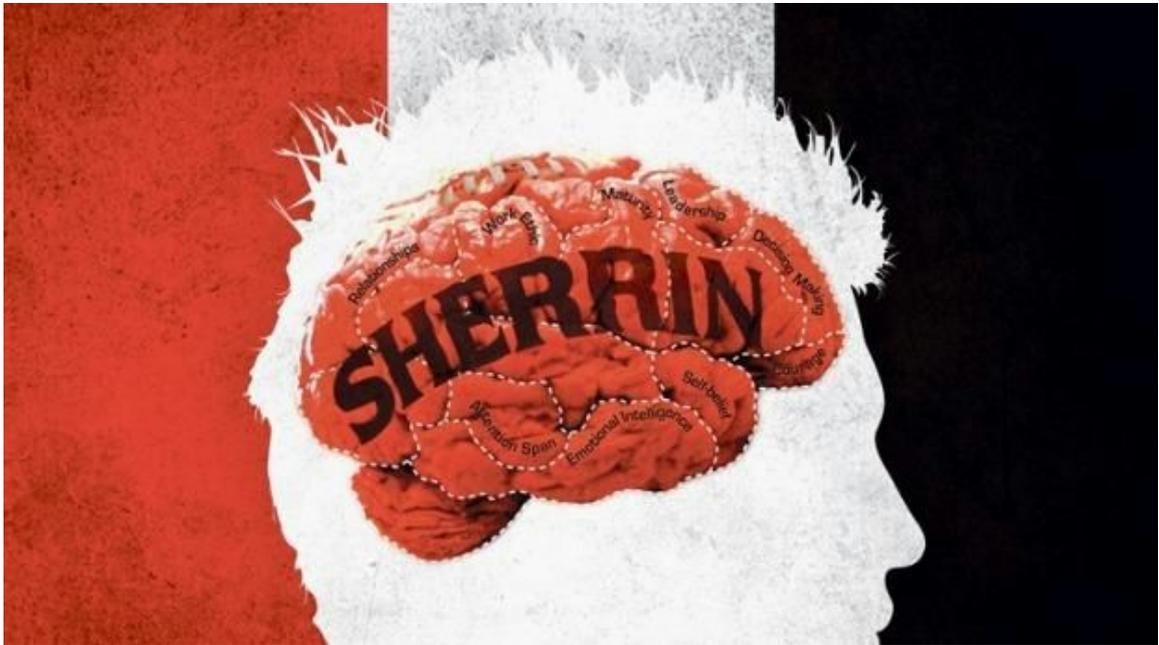
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When St Kilda conquered both their own Demons and those wearing red and blue in those astonishing final 40 seconds at Etihad, some players spoke of how specific "mind training" had contributed to their improvement and composure.

This year, the Saints have formally introduced mind training to their regime, in a program devised and run by a group that worked with the South Sydney Rabbitohs in their premiership-winning season last year.



At the behest of coach Alan Richardson, the Saints have hired a group known as Out of Your Mind to improve the psychological side of their performance and, in particular, to fast-track the collective mental resilience of the young team.

In an innovation that the club likens to the introduction to AFL clubs of leadership facilitator Leading Teams, the Saints have been training their players to deal with stressful situations in games, to shut out negativity and keep them focused on the task at hand. Every two or three weeks, Out of Your Mind's Derek Leddie and Samantha Graham fly down to Melbourne from Sydney and hold mind training sessions in which the players use a variety of tools – such as meditation, visualisation and breathing exercises – aimed at improving their mental application during games.

In their sessions, Leddie and Graham – who also work with companies – review St Kilda's past two or three games from a mental perspective, and the players are separated into defenders, midfielders and forwards for some mind-based training.

The Out of Your Mind program was introduced to St Kilda during pre-season, when the Saints spent two or three days acquiring various mind training tools after first becoming educated about how the brain affects performance. Prior to games, some St Kilda players will deploy techniques they have learnt in the mind training program – which, thus far, consists of what Leddie said was 15 to 20 tools. Some players could do a visualisation process before a game.

"There's nothing compulsory, it's up to them. We give them a suite of tools and they can pick and choose."

As Richardson explained to Fairfax Media, there are "many facets" to training players – such as technical skills and tactics – and this includes getting them to "reset and refocus when things don't go as planned, which happens every game".

But Richardson said the mind training program varied for individuals, because senior players had acquired, through experience, their own methods for ensuring their attitude or mental approach was working in games.

The mind training undertaken by the Saints is entirely about performance in games, although Leddie said the club had also worked on "creating a story for the season" that was positive, after finishing bottom last year. "And it's about shutting out all the negative stories from the recent past."

Leddie, whose background is in consumer psychology and who had no relationship with football prior to the Saints, said he and Graham, a PhD in adult education, had worked with companies such as Lend Lease and Nestle and had recently undertaken a program at a NSW private school aimed at preparing students for the stresses of year 12.

The Saints are hoping to have the players, particularly younger ones, focus on performing in the moment, avoiding external distractions and anxieties.

Leddie said the Saints differed from the Rabbitohs, who were a mature side that had fallen just short of a premiership and "were looking for a little edge".

Rabbitohs coach Michael Maguire is a passionate advocate of mind training, which is part of the "mindfulness" movement. In the US, a number of sporting teams have taken a similar approach.