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Don't blame England World Cup failures on inexperience

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We'll do better next time. Tolga Bozoglu/EPA

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England's footballers have had their worst ever start to a World Cup – and, bar a miracle, face an early exit. So begins the inevitable search to understand the cause of this calamity. The squad's inexperience is one avenue where blame may be laid, but inexperience can have its advantages at tournaments and the current crop of players will benefit hugely going forward.

Scar-free

One of the best reasons for including youngsters within World Cup squads is that they have yet to be scarred by big defeats in previous tournaments. Research in psychology suggests that we can remember times where we have been in similar situations, and that our memory can be distorted to make those events appear worse than they actually were. Based on England's past experiences of major tournaments, first-hand memories are not necessarily a good thing.

England's track record of going out on penalties is particularly problematic. Experiencing it first hand, then enduring the media coverage, reaction of the general public and their teammates involved, can have a scarring effect on players who will have automatic flashbacks when faced with a similar situation. Should England somehow still progress to the knockout stages and a penalty shootout, the younger players would benefit from not having gone through this. Plus, they can bring positivity to the whole squad.

Dealing with boredom

Inexperience at major tournaments can actually affect players worst off the pitch, where a big problem that players face is boredom. During the World Cup, players are in a cocooned environment, which means they can only do certain activities when they are not training or playing matches. This generally constitutes playing computer games, playing cards and sleeping – they rarely interact with anyone outside the immediate squad. This can be difficult for younger players, whereas older players with experience of having competed in previous tournaments could have learned how to deal with this boredom and counteract it.

As well as dealing with boredom, players may suffer from being kept away from their families and other support networks during tournaments. There is the potential that young players are kept away from their family for a longer period than they have been at any other point in their career.

Research suggests that social support is an important source of comfort for many players during difficult moments in their career, such as when they lose matches, perform poorly or get sent off. During the World Cup, many normal sources of comfort for the player (such as family support) may be lost, meaning players can find it harder to deal with, and recover from, difficult moments.

Looking at performance


Ultimately, it is about performance at the World Cup. Some teams (eg, Spain), have stuck with tried and trusted experienced player in their squad. Their elimination from the tournament highlights that a squad full of experienced players may not necessarily be the most successful. There have been suggestions that the omission of the likes of John Terry and Ashley Cole could have had a negative influence on England's World Cup campaign. But the results of Spain highlight that experience does not necessarily equal performance. Additionally, the players chosen in their place have had much stronger seasons.

England's inclusion of young players in the squad will greatly benefit them moving forward. They will have gained valuable experience that will help them in future tournaments. They will have an idea of what to expect, how to use their time well off the pitch and how to deal with the lack of family support during the tournament. Even overcoming failure can become easier second time round, as coping resources can be developed to deal with this.

Ultimately, a mixture of youth and experience appears to be the best approach for countries competing in the World Cup. England lost out to an Italy side that had a mixture of youth and experience, and Chile have a squad who also have this mixture. Prior to the next World Cup, a lot of the younger England players will gain more valuable experience in football, and this will only be added to by their involvement in the current event. This will undoubtedly help them moving forward.

Sport scienceSport psychologyWorld Cup 2014England football team

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