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The Mind in Sport

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So, my name is Jerry Medernach. I hold a doctorate in sport science and am a trained physical-education teacher with a focus on sport psychology. In my work — both as a lecturer at the University of Luxembourg and as a researcher at the German Sport University Cologne — I am currently working intensively on one topic: the mind in sport.

What does that mean? It is about attention, for example — where an athlete looks during a match. But it is also about finding optimal decisions: an intelligent solution, but also a creative one that was not immediately expected and yet is efficient. One factor is decisive here: our prior knowledge — everything we have already experienced through sport.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

In recent years we have published a series of studies. In climbing, for instance, they showed that top athletes not only make better decisions, but also reach the better solutions faster and make fewer strategic mistakes. They more often find creative solutions, and when things get complicated they find simpler ways to get there.

THE MOVEMENT REPERTOIRE

An important factor is the movement repertoire — prior experience. You have to picture it as a large network: the more prior experience, the larger the network. A bit like a computer — the more powerful it is, the more information our brain can process, and the faster. Experienced athletes recognise patterns faster, like grandmasters in chess, and know immediately where to look.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SCHOOL?

The mind must move more to the centre of physical education. In practice this means: versatility — a broad foundation of sports and movements. It also means recognising synergies, giving children time and differentiating. And finally it means working inductively: we must not hand pupils the solution, but let them learn to reach solutions themselves — that is how we train their creativity and their self-efficacy.