

Mastering the Mind: An NLP Guide for Youth Sports Coaches

Welcome! As a youth coach, you are much more than someone who teaches tactics and skills. You are an architect of confidence. Every single day, your players look to you, listen to you, and form beliefs about what they can and cannot achieve.

This guide is designed to introduce you to **Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)**. It sounds complicated, but it is actually very simple. Think of it as a manual for how the brain processes data. By understanding how young athletes think, you can help them break through barriers, smash their goals, and have a lot more fun.

1. What on Earth is NLP?

Let's break down the name so it's easy to understand:

- **Neuro:** Your neurology—your brain and your nervous system, which take in information through your senses.
- **Linguistic:** The language and words you use (both talking out loud to others and the "self-talk" inside your own head).
- **Programming:** The patterns, habits, and mental "software" you run that lead to your actions.

The Backstory

NLP was created in the **1970s** in California by two men named **Richard Bandler** (a mathematician and computer expert) and **John Grinder** (a linguistics professor). They wanted to know a simple secret: *Why are some people absolutely brilliant at what they do, while others struggle?*

Instead of just looking at physical skills, they studied how top performers **thought**. They realised that excellence has a structure. If you can copy the mental recipe of a champion, you can replicate their success.

Champions of the Mind

Since its creation, thousands of elite athletes across the globe have used NLP and mental training to win gold medals and world titles. When we look at top athletes, they frequently talk about the power of managing their thoughts.

For example, elite snowboarders—who have to throw themselves off massive snow ramps at high speeds—heavily rely on shifting their internal thoughts. Young champions often note that when they feel trapped by pressure, the biggest breakthrough comes from actively **changing their thoughts** rather than just practicing the physical trick more. If the thought changes, the body relaxes, and the performance follows.

2. The Success Recipe:

Event → Thought → Behaviour → Outcome

In sports, most people think that whatever happens on the pitch or court dictates how a player feels. But that is actually a mistake! There is a specific recipe for every single thing we experience:

Event → Thought → Behaviour → Outcome

Here is how it works in real life:

1. **The Event:** Something happens. (e.g., A player misses a crucial penalty kick).
2. **The Thought:** The player runs a story in their head.
3. **The Behaviour:** That thought dictates how their body moves and acts.
4. **The Outcome:** The final result of the play.

Crucial Coach Rule: To change the **Outcome**, you cannot just yell at the *Behaviour*. You have to go back to the start and help the athlete change the **Thought**.

Two Different Recipes for the Same Event:

- **The Negative Loop:**
 - *Event:* Misses a shot.
 - *Thought:* "I'm rubbish today, the coach is going to drop me."
 - *Behaviour:* Head drops, shoulders slump, stops chasing the ball.
 - *Outcome:* Plays poorly and gets substituted.
- **The Winning Loop:**
 - *Event:* Misses a shot.
 - *Thought:* "Unlucky! I had the right idea, next one is definitely going in."
 - *Behaviour:* Claps hands, stays alert, sprints back into position.
 - *Outcome:* Steals the ball back and scores on the next play.

3. The Brain's Filters: Deletions, Distortions, and Generalisations

Every single second, millions of bits of information flood into our brains. If we tried to process all of it, our heads would explode! To protect us, our brains use three major filters.

As a coach, if you learn to spot these three mental traps in your players, you can change their performance instantly.

1. Deletions (Leaving things out)

This happens when the brain completely wipes away good pieces of information because it is hyper-focused on something else.

- **The Trap:** A player has a fantastic match, scores a goal, makes five great passes, but makes *one* bad mistake at the end. Because of the deletion filter, they forget all the brilliant things they did and say, *"I played terribly today."*
- **How to Coach It:** Pull them back to reality. Ask: *"What specifically did you delete? Tell me three things you did really well before that mistake."*

2. Distortions (Twisting the truth)

This happens when a player changes reality in their head, usually turning a tiny spark of information into a huge problem.

- **The Trap:** You are looking closely at a tactical board while a player is speaking, or you look slightly worried about the game. The player sees your face and distorts it: *"The coach looked annoyed at me. He hates how I play."* In reality, you were just thinking about the traffic on the way home!
- **How to Coach It:** Check their reality. Ask: *"How do you know that for sure? Could there be another reason I looked that way?"*

3. Generalisations (Making a rule out of one event)

This happens when an athlete takes a single event and decides it represents a permanent rule for their whole life. They start using absolute words like **"always"**, **"never"**, **"everyone"**, or **"no one"**.

- **The Trap:** A young player gets tackled twice in a row by a defender. They run over to the sideline and say, *"I can **never** get past this defender,"* or *"I **always** lose the ball."*
- **How to Coach It:** Challenge the absolute word. Gently mock the rule by asking: *"Never? Have you literally never passed anyone in your whole life? What happened last week in training?"* Break the fake rule.

4. The Building Blocks of Thoughts: Submodalities

Our thoughts aren't just abstract clouds; they are made up of mini-ingredients called **submodalities**. Think of them as the settings on a television screen or a sound system inside your head.

We process the world through three main building blocks: **Visual** (what we see), **Audible** (what we hear), and **Kinesthetic** (what we physically feel).

When a young player is scared or stressed, the "movie" in their head is usually massive, bright, loud, and very close to them. As a coach, you can teach them to alter these settings to turn down the fear.

Here are 7 examples of the settings your players can tweak for each sense:

Visual (What they SEE)	Audible (What they HEAR)	Kinesthetic (What they FEEL)
Near / Far: Is the mental picture right in front of their eyes or far away?	Volume: Is the voice inside their head loud or quiet?	Location: Where in their body do they feel the pressure or nerves?
Bright / Dim: Is the memory glowing brightly or dark and faded?	Tone: Is the inner voice harsh, sarcastic, or calm and encouraging?	Temperature: Does the feeling feel hot, cold, or neutral?
Colour / Black & White: Is it full colour or a dull black-and-white image?	Direction: Is the sound coming from the left, right, or straight ahead?	Movement: Is the feeling still, or is it spinning and moving around?
Moving / Still: Is it a moving video clip or a frozen photograph?	Speed: Is the inner voice speaking super fast or incredibly slow?	Weight: Does the feeling feel heavy like lead or light like a feather?
Size: Is the image life-sized, gigantic, or tiny like a postage stamp?	Clarity: Is the sound crisp and clear, or muffled and fuzzy?	Texture: Is the physical sensation sharp, smooth, rough, or soft?

<p>Focus: Is the image pin-sharp or blurry around the edges?</p>	<p>Source: Is it their own voice, a teammate's voice, or a coach's voice?</p>	<p>Shape: Does the knot in their stomach feel like a square, a circle, or a jumble?</p>
<p>3D / Flat: Does it look like a real 3D room or a flat 2D drawing?</p>	<p>Rhythm: Is the sound continuous, choppy, or rhythmic?</p>	<p>Intensity: Is the feeling a sharp, high vibration or a slow, dull throb?</p>

A Quick Coach Trick:

If a player says, *"I can see the moment I missed the shot and it's terrifying me,"* tell them to close their eyes. Have them take that mental movie, shrink it down to the size of a postage stamp, turn it black and white, and push it far out into the distance. Watch how quickly their face relaxes!

5. Taking it Beyond the Game

The most beautiful thing about teaching these mental skills to youth players is that **sports are just a practice ground for life.**

The exact same mental filters and recipes apply everywhere else:

- **At school:** A student gets a bad grade on one maths test and generalises: *"I'm stupid, I'll never pass maths."* You can teach them to change that thought to: *"This test was tough, but I can learn the bits I missed."*
- **At home:** A teenager thinks their parents are angry with them (distortion) just because they are tired after work.
- **With friends:** Deleting all the nice comments from friends and obsessing over one silly comment online.

By teaching your young athletes how to master their thoughts on the training pitch, you aren't just building a better player. You are giving them a toolkit to become a resilient, confident, and incredibly successful adult in the real world. Keep building those minds!

This video offers an excellent overview of the NLP communication model—showing exactly how deletions, distortions, and generalisations filter our reality—making it a perfect companion resource for visualising how your young players process your coaching.

[Watch the video](#)