

Week 13-Think, Play, Win: Sports Psych Tips for IL ODP Players

Academy Island at Arsenal FC *a tool to improvise athlete emotional literacy*



As a sport psychology practitioner, I regularly use a tool inspired by the “**Academy Island**” concept developed within the Arsenal Academy.

Academy Island is a powerful visual metaphor that represents the journey of a young player- the highs, the setbacks, the transitions, and the personal growth that happen both on and off the pitch. What makes it so effective is that it creates a **shared language** around mental health, wellbeing, and performance. With the athletes I support, the Island allows them to:

- Identify where they feel they are in their journey
- Reflect on both positive and challenging periods
- Review performances beyond just results
- Explore life outside of sport
- Open up conversations that might otherwise feel difficult

Importantly, the tool normalizes the reality that development is not linear. There are “sunny beaches” and “rough waters.” There are growth moments and setbacks. By mapping these experiences visually, athletes can step back, gain perspective, and build psychological flexibility rather than simply reacting emotionally in the moment.

I’ve found it particularly helpful with young players navigating selection decisions, injury, transitions between teams, or the early stages of puberty- periods where identity and confidence can fluctuate.

The strength of Academy Island is not just in the metaphor itself, but in what it promotes:

- Ownership of development
- Honest dialogue
- A caring yet challenging environment
- A focus on becoming the best version of oneself -physically and mentally

When used consistently, it becomes more than a one-off activity. It becomes a framework for reflection, growth, and thriving through the inevitable challenges of sport and life

Academy Island (3-Minute Self Check)

(Simple version: Look at the map. Place yourself. Notice. Move forward.)

Step 1: Look at the Map (30 seconds)

Take a slow breath.

Scan the Island.

Don't overthink it.

Ask yourself: "Where do I feel I am right now?" (use the full list of terms below to help)

Step 2: Place Yourself (30 seconds)

Put a dot or X on the spot that feels most accurate in this moment.

That's it. No judging. No explaining. Just honest placement.

Step 3: Name It (1 minute)

Write 2–3 reasons why you placed yourself here.

Examples:

- I didn't start with my team this past weekend "Frustration Fortress"
- I volunteered to take a PK for my team "Courage Crest"
- A new coach is coaching my team "Winds of Change"

You're not trying to fix it yet. You're just noticing it.

Step 4: Choose One Small Action to help you move through the feeling (1 minute)

Now ask: "What is one small action that helps me from here?"

Examples:

- 3 slow breaths
- Say "Next play"
- Drink water
- 5 minutes of focused touches
- Text a teammate
- Early sleep

Write it down. Do it.

That's It. The Island is not about being in the "perfect" place. It's about:

- Awareness
- Honesty
- Small next steps

You don't have to move across the whole Island. Just take one feeling at a time!

Academy Island Terms Defined

Here are the interpretations of each term as locations on a metaphorical island map of emotional literacy for academy soccer players, along with what they represent:

1. The Island of Opportunity (1st Team)

Meaning: The goal for many players, representing the chance to make it onto the first team. It symbolizes the pinnacle of achievement and the culmination of hard work and dedication.

2. Tides of Transition

Meaning: The constant changes and adjustments players must navigate, such as moving between teams, adapting to new coaches, or dealing with life changes.

3. Winds of Change

Meaning: The external factors and influences that bring about change in a player's career or personal life. It represents adaptability and the ability to adjust to new circumstances.

4. Head loss

Meaning: Moments when players lose their composure or focus, often leading to poor decisions or emotional outbursts. It's an area to learn emotional control and regain composure.

5. Disaster Zone

Meaning: The dark side of sports, where players face serious issues, such as bullying, drugs, blackmail, match-fixing, betting, and being exploited online. It represents the dangers that can derail a career.

6. Urban Jungle

Meaning: Environments where players might face negative influences such as gangs or restrictions on their freedom. It represents the challenges of navigating difficult social environments.

7. Mount Challenge

Meaning: The high point of difficult tasks and obstacles that players must overcome. It represents perseverance, effort, and the ability to tackle tough challenges head-on.

8. Valley of Despair

Meaning: Low points in a player's journey where they might feel hopeless or defeated. It's a place to learn resilience and find ways to climb out of despair.

9. Courage Crest

Meaning: The peak where players gather bravery and confidence to face their fears and challenges. It represents the triumph of courage over adversity.

10. The Frozen Iceland (Complacent)

Meaning: A cold, stagnant place where players become complacent and stop striving for improvement. It represents the danger of losing motivation and the importance of continual growth.

11. Lake Calm

Meaning: A peaceful area where players find tranquility and balance. It represents the importance of mental relaxation and maintaining calm under pressure.

12. Growth Grasslands

Meaning: Fertile areas where players develop and improve their skills. It represents continuous learning and personal development.

13. Education Base

Meaning: The foundation where players gain knowledge, both academically and about the game. It represents the importance of education and intellectual growth alongside athletic training.

14. Frustration Fortress

Meaning: A fortified area where players often feel trapped by their frustrations. It represents the challenge of managing and overcoming frustration.

15. Performing Planes

Meaning: Open fields where players perform at their best. It represents peak performance and the achievement of high standards.

16. The Lost Forest (Hidden City)

Meaning: A dense, confusing area where players might feel lost or uncertain. It symbolizes the journey of self-discovery and finding one's path.

17. The Bog of Boredom

Meaning: A dull, sticky area where players feel uninspired or uninterested. It represents the need to find ways to stay engaged and motivated.

18. Isolation Island

Meaning: A secluded place where players feel isolated or alone. It represents the importance of social connections and seeking support.

19. Desert of Determination

Meaning: A harsh, challenging environment where only determination and perseverance can see players through. It represents the grit and endurance needed to succeed.

20. Bay of Plenty

Meaning: A bountiful area where resources, opportunities, and support are abundant. It represents prosperity and the rewards of hard work.

21. The City (Distraction)

Meaning: A bustling area filled with distractions that can divert players from their goals. It represents the need to maintain focus and avoid temptations.

22. Pressure Point

Meaning: A high-pressure area where players feel intense stress and expectations. It represents the need to develop coping mechanisms to handle pressure effectively.

By navigating this metaphorical island, academy soccer players can enhance their emotional literacy, leading to better performance and personal growth.

Parent Guide: Supporting the Academy Island Check-In

The goal is not to analyze. The goal is to create safety, awareness, and forward movement.

1. Let Them Place Themselves (Without Interference)

When your child looks at the map and places their dot:

Your role is to say:

- “Thanks for sharing.”
- “That makes sense.”
- “I’m glad you showed me.”

Avoid:

- “Why are you there?”
- “You shouldn’t feel that way.”
- “But you played great!”
- Problem-solving immediately

This moment is about **honesty, not correction**.

2. Ask One Gentle Question (Optional)

If they’re open to talking, ask just one:

- “What made you choose that spot?”

Keep your tone calm and curious. If they don’t want to talk? Respect it. The check-in still worked.

3. Normalize All Locations on the Island

Remind them:

- Everyone moves around the Island.
- Confidence changes.
- Frustration happens.
- Being in rough water doesn’t mean something is wrong.

The Island works because it removes shame.

What This Builds Over Time

When parents stay calm and consistent, athletes develop:

- Emotional awareness
- Psychological flexibility
- Ownership
- Confidence that isn’t dependent on praise

The Island becomes a **reflection tool**, not a performance report card.

The Golden Rule

Your child does not need you to move their dot. They need you to accept where they placed it.

Final Message to Youth Players

Where you place your dot doesn't define you. It just tells you where you are right now.

Every player moves around the Island confidence rises, frustration shows up, pressure comes and goes. That's normal. That's development. The goal isn't to be on the "perfect" part of the Island.

The goal is to:

- Be honest
- Choose one small action
- Keep moving

You don't have to cross the whole Island today. Just take the next step.

Want More? If you're interested in **pep360's individual, small-group, or team mental-skills support**, click the link below to complete an **Interest Form**.

Let's Think. Let's Play. Let's Win together.

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