

DESIRE

By Michelle Akers

From Michelle Akers Women's Soccer Home Page

When I asked Roberto Rivelino (a Brazilian World Champion and soccer legend) how he became such a deadly free-kick artist, he replied "Practice." It was simple. He worked on it every day. As I watched him drive the ball into his chosen corner from 40 yards out, it was clear that this was not an entirely truthful answer. Let's face it, if 98 percent of the entire soccer population practiced free kicks two hours daily, they still would not have that Rivelino ability. The guy has just got an incredible talent for bending and blasting the ball into the goal.

As I watched him, I began to take a serious look at myself. Did I have the physical ability to do this? Yes, I thought, with a lot of hard, tedious work. Then, I asked myself, Was I honestly willing to put enough effort into an ambition of this size? Seeing him put the ball into the net and hearing the worshipful reactions of those around me. I thought, Of course, who wouldn't? But I knew I was fooling myself. The real question was: Would I practice every day, alone, without anyone pushing or praising me? Did I really want it? Was there a fire inside me, an ambition to commit myself to this goal? After careful consideration and introspection, I told myself, Yes, I would go after it.

Make It Real

As I watched Rivelino work, I began to visualize myself in the World Cup. One of my teammates has been brutally fouled outside the goal. Thousands of fans watch breathlessly as I step up to take the free kick. Thoughts race through my head, Did I practice enough? What if I miss? I shake my head to toss the doubts away and think positively... it doesn't matter if I miss, the important thing is that I try. I look at the goal, see the wall and position of the goalkeeper, and strike the ball. It goes over the wall and bends into the upper left corner. My team rushes toward each other in celebration, as we are now World Champions.

The Plan Of Attack

Slowly drifting back to reality, I began to study Rivelino from every angle possible. I tried to memorize his form, where his foot struck the ball and how the ball spun off into the goal. And then, I asked him to critique my form. I listened and tried to do exactly as he said. I questioned him about daily development, looking for specific things to work and improve upon. Finally, I began to formulate a plan for myself....

Over the months, I have learned it is easy to put off practicing for other "more important" things (fitness, weight lifting, the beach?). That is, until I realize there is a National Team training camp or tournament approaching and my stomach starts to do flip flops over the fact I have not been practicing my free kicks. Luckily, I learn lessons quickly and have consistently put in four or five hours extra a week specifically for free kicks... and as expected, have improved tremendously. Granted, I'm no Rivelino, but I am now more confident and aggressive in set plays because I know I have done everything possible to prepare myself. The feeling after sticking one off a free kick is uniquely gratifying. I imagine it's because it had 10 months to perfect...and suddenly, in one quick moment, all the hard work had paid off.

It Is Up To You

This experience shows the steps I took toward discovering "the secret" within myself. Below, I have outlined the process that might help you find your secret.

Some people follow these steps without realizing it, as was my case, while others need a bit of prompting or explaining to get started. To take your first step, begin by answering the following questions:

- ***Do You Truly Want To Do It?***
What does the little voice inside you really want? It's important to realize that it's ok to not want to be the best soccer player that ever lived. Maybe you play to have fun, while others play with higher ambitions. Give yourself an honest answer, as this will set the stage for future decisions and expectations.
- ***Do You Have The Physical Ability To Achieve Your Goal?***
Again, be honest. Sometimes, you don't know you can do it until you try. It is also important to be realistic in your abilities- not everyone can break world records.
- ***Are You Willing To Put In The Required Effort?***
Sometimes, doing just 10 minutes extra a day of practice will lead to bigger and better commitments and results. Start small and work your way up.

Visualize Your Dream

Make it real in your mind. Without seeing the end result, your mind and body won't know where you are trying to take it. Imagine your vision in detail ... the smell of the grass, your sweaty uniform, the noise from the crowd, your feelings at that moment. Be specific.

Make A Plan

Ask for suggestions and listen objectively. Take steps daily (weekly, monthly) toward accomplishing your goal. Write it down and stick to it.