

An Approach to Coaching Rugby League

Foreword

This compilation has been written based on my experience and involvement in Rugby League as a player, coach, development officer, manager and latterly, as Director of Coach Education.

These articles then, are quite clearly the result of the many conversations, research, reading, situations and experiences I have been involved in throughout my extensive involvement in the greatest game of all.

Due acknowledgment should be given to those whose original thought processes and words have helped shape, influence and dovetail my own, in contributing to this work.

Each article has been prepared in the hope that it offers ideas and provokes thought with regard to the many aspects covered. They are all pertinent to coaching and coach involvement in a modern day Rugby League environment.

I have deliberately chosen to adopt the phrase 'An Approach to' in the title as it is obvious that the articles serve only to offer my opinion, and my way of approaching each situation. In doing so I remain mindful that there are other methods and other ways of approaching the same situations.

Ray Unsworth
Director of Coach Education
The Rugby Football League

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1.

An Approach to Starting Out in Coaching

Isn't it just great to be involved in coaching the great game of Rugby League? And even better news, there's no limit as to how good you can be and to how far you can go in coaching providing you are prepared to work at it.

Opportunities to progress do exist in the game.

There is a clear and defined pathway of progression and it's quite simple to see where you currently are on the pathway and to plan and map out the steps that take you exactly where you want to eventually be.

And, in doing just that, in theory, you could become the next International Coach assuming that's what you aspire to be.

But, a word of warning, it doesn't just happen.

The helping hand we are all looking for is usually found at the end of our own arm and realistically we have got to go out and get it!

So, where do you begin?

How do you measure your success as a coach?

- Is it about winning competitions or much more than that?
- Isn't coaching about helping players develop skills?
- Isn't there also an element of making your preparation and competition an enjoyable experience?
- Haven't you got a duty to help all the players you touch within your coaching, particularly

the young and developing players?

Couldn't you, through your coaching involvement, help players raise their self-esteem and give or create a positive feel-good factor for them?

Wouldn't you (as coach) want to do that?

And doesn't it also go without saying that in your role as coach, it's essential that you be well versed in all the technical and tactical aspects of the game?

Assuming that you are, then you also must be capable of presenting those aspects because coaching in its present form is teaching and, coaching and teaching combined, is leadership.

In the final analysis, it is on some of those questions posed previously that your ability as a coach will be measured.

Even though in the real world (in the cut and thrust of coaching), when a coach loses, his or her job, it's usually results orientated, I'll put it to you that your true worth as a coach goes deeper than that. The players you are involved with will already have formed their own opinions and I would like to bet that it wouldn't be based on results.

It will be based on how you coach and how you operate.

So a good starting point when planning a coaching career, enthused and wanting to make an impact and aspiring to be the best would be to consider this question:

What is your Philosophy on coaching?

And if you haven't currently got a coaching philosophy or developed it thoroughly, then I can tell you, it's not really rocket science.

Just answering two simple questions: Why do you coach and what do you hope to achieve, would go some way towards developing your own coaching philosophy.

So what is it?

A coaching philosophy is just a set of guidelines that basically come from evaluating your own experiences, gathering opinions and knowledge and ultimately knowing where you want to go in the game and what hopes you have for the future.

A coach's philosophy will, from time to time, become the catalyst for challenging one's self and it's only by continually accepting that challenge that you will move forward. Eventually, it will set you apart from other coaches and help you grow in the game.

In Great Britain, for example, there is a ten-year or ten thousand-hour rule, which is a well-researched statistic published by Sport England. The rule implies that it takes ten years' coaching experience or ten thousand coaching hours in the field to become a true senior and experienced coach.

That shouldn't be looked upon as a sentence being imposed upon you. It's not about 'doing your time'.

During those ten years, it's about developing yourself, adjusting and refining your philosophy over time and should you do that and continually improve, then the good news is that the players in your charge also improve! And providing that you always work within the principles and beliefs that make up your philosophy then you will have made a good start and have a solid foundation to progress towards your coaching goals.

Should you further explore the 'coaches' toolbox you'll find there are many more skills and qualities required to become 'the best you can be' hence the ten year or ten thousand hour rule.

However, I do want to major on three qualities that I feel are massively important in achieving your career goals as a coach.

The qualities are Knowledge, Communication and Leadership.

So, what of knowledge?

It is said that the three components that underpin your coaching are knowledge of Yourself, Your Players and the Game.

Should your particular knowledge be deficient in any of these areas, then your ability to communicate is also deficient.

It is equally important that you have all three of these components in as large a dose as is possible.

Communication.

Don't ever underestimate the role that effective communication plays in your coaching. You must know yourself and your capabilities if you want to be a good coach of others.

Whilst developing as a coach you must constantly evaluate and update your technical and tactical knowledge, get to know your players personally and in so doing, develop positive relationships with them.

You are in the people business and the best coaches do study people.

Communication is a massive subject and includes talking, listening, negotiating, encouraging and consoling, sending and receiving messages that are both verbal and non-verbal.

It is estimated that over seventy percent of all communication is non-verbal. That is, it is made up of gestures, facial expression and body movement. The remaining thirty percent, 'the spoken word', we do consciously have some control over because we can select our words carefully.

However, what about that seventy percent? Are we really aware of how we come across?

The reality is that our players are making interpretations based on what they see of our expressions and actions. Therefore, the potential for misunderstanding is high.

Also, it is said that we only hear half of what is said, we actually only listen to half of that, we only understand half of that, we believe half of that and we retain and remember half of that. In fact, less than four percent of what is actually said is taken in.

This demonstrates how important communication is.

Therefore, it goes without saying that:

- Knowledge is the Backbone of coaching.
- Leadership is the Heart of coaching.

- Communication is the Soul of coaching.
- And it's all underpinned by your Philosophy.

And, what of leadership?

- How do you become a leader?
- What is it that sets leaders apart from those who follow and what makes you the leader in your environment?
- Can you provide direction?
- Can you build the environment in which you operate?
- Can you instil values (your philosophy) into the team?
- Can you motivate and problem solve when necessary?

If the answers to the questions posed are positive, then you are well on your way. However, if there are some negatives, then inevitably it's back to improving communication.

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2.

An Approach to Integrating Long Term Athlete Development into Rugby League

It's a long time since Great Britain last won a Rugby League Test series against the Kangaroos and it took many years to win back the Ashes.

How long is it since we last had a Wimbledon champion?

And wasn't it 1966 when England won the football World Cup?

Having said that, it is true to say that we have experienced some success, but it's also fair to say that over recent years in British sport, we have struggled to win meaningful competitions with any degree of consistency. In fact you would need a very long memory to remember the days when we were consistently successful in any sport.

So it proffers the comment; 'If you train the way you always train, you will play the way you always play.'

It was against this background and a lobby from British sport that the government commissioned a coaching task force to study sports development and preparation. Their focus was on particular nations that were perceived to be successful.

What is it that they do?

How do they prepare?

What systems of coach education do they use and how do they train their coaches to prepare their players and athletes to be the best they can?

Their findings concluded that Great Britain should undertake a major review of coach education systems by implementing standards of training for coaches that go some way towards professionalising the role of coaching.

Equally importantly, they must adapt their approach to preparation by developing future athletes and players using a long-term athlete development model.

So what is the long-term athlete development model, and how would it work in Rugby League?

In a sentence, it is a model of an integrated sports system where the requirements of the player, dependent on their biological age, are met throughout the lifetime of that athlete. In plain English, it is a model for player development that spans almost the cradle to the grave or hopefully, in Rugby League's case, from: Beginner to Winner.

This type of preparation is not new and is of eastern bloc origin. Indeed, in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and Cuba, children begin their involvement in sport with multilateral and multi-skilled preparation. This approach teaches all children the fundamental skills of gymnastics and track and field as these contain the basic movements that are common to all sports.

For too long in Rugby League, we have followed very short-term goals. Winning the next game or competition is often as far ahead as most coaches think.

The use of a long-term athlete development model is far different, advocating a much longer and more systematic approach. Not only is this approach proven to produce more elite level athletes and players but also a greater base of athletes who are nearing their genetic potential in physical capacities.

Consider that in comparison to what I call our winning by Sunday approach. Here we experience most of our successes early in the player's development, very often producing junior champions and teams, due to our early specialisation approach, only to find that ultimately these players do not excel at adult level. This is due to (in some cases) a distinct lack of physical excellence caused by developmental neglect in the early years.

Rugby League, as an open skill sport, is regarded in athlete development terms as a "late specialisation sport". Late specialisation sports follow a six-stage model:

FUNDamentals (Movement Literacy)

Mini-mod football: 6 – 9yrs males, 6 – 8yrs females.

The emphasis in this phase is on the development of fundamentals - movement skills such as running, jumping, throwing, agility, balance and hand eye coordination that are the basis of most sports.

The focus is on the acquisition of basic motor skills, fitness and fun rather than on competition and winning.

Participation in as many activities/sports as possible is encouraged during this phase to ensure that young people experience a wide range of sports and do not specialise too early.

Learning to Train (Sports Literacy)

Mod games, transition football international rules: 9 – 12yrs males, 8 – 11yrs females.

This phase builds on the FUNDamentals and develops a range of basic sports skills with a major focus on sport skill acquisition and movement mastery. It introduces and ideally masters all basic sport skills.

In addition, non-weight bearing games and exercises are introduced with warm up and mental skills.

The major emphasis during this phase should be on the consolidation of sport specific skills, development of fitness and further development of mental skills. This does not mean that young players should not compete but that a better balance of training to competition is required.

Ideally sixty percent training to forty percent competition ratio is recommended.

Training to Train (Sport Selection and Talent Identification)

Junior football, scholarship programmes 12 – 16yrs males, 11 – 15yrs females.

Training to Compete (Specialisation and Developing Potential)

Youth football, junior and senior Academy grades and open age: 16 – 21yrs males.

The focus in this fourth phase is on developing advanced sport specific skills, mental skills and techniques, which are developed along side tactics and game strategies, as well as individualised conditioning programmes.

About eighty percent of activities should be sport and individual specific.

A young player is likely to be involved in selected competitions (fifty percent) at this phase and over training or too much competition must be avoided.

Training to Win (Expert Performance and Realising Potential)

First grade and open age competition: 21yrs.

At this phase, all of the young player's physical, technical, tactical and mental capacities are now fully established. The focus is on specific training to achieve optimum performance at key competitions and maintenance of the capacities needed to compete successfully.

Ideally, twenty-five percent of training at this phase is likely to be sport specific and/or event orientation with seventy-five percent competition.

Retirement and Retaining (Retraining and retaining the performer)

A big job and a culture change in the way that developing sport in general needs to be undertaken.

This final phase refers to activities performed after a player retires from competition permanently. During this time, the ex-athletes can move into sport related careers.

Yes, it's a system designed to support our future players throughout their development, but it will need a renaissance in coach education to equip existing and future coaches with a thorough understanding and knowledge of how exactly to implement such change.

Methodical preparation at each stage of a sporting curriculum designed to develop our future players to be the best they can, requires coaches working at each level of athlete development to carefully consider all of their programmes of activity.

By way of an example, I have benchmarked the 'play the ball' to reflect a learning programme in terms of when to introduce, develop, optimise and maximise player learning that is commensurate with the stages of development the player is going through. **ENDS**

Diagram 1:

Skill Development	Fundamentals	Learn To Train	Train To Train	Train To Compete	Train To Win
Falling, Rolling, Tumbling	Int' dev' opt'				
Regaining feet	Int' dev' opt'				
Controlling the ball	Int' dev' opt'				
Body Position	Int' dev' opt'				
Ball Position	Int' dev' opt'				
Foot Action	Int' dev' opt'				
Roll of acting 1/2 back	Int'	Dev'	Opt'	Max'	
Passing from the Ground	Int'	Dev'	Opt'	Max'	
Snap, Sweep, Touch			Int' Dev'	Opt' Max'	Max'
Roll, Snap, Sweep, Touch			Int' Dev'	Opt' Max'	Max'
Play The Ball Speed & Control 1			Int' Dev'	Opt' Max'	Max'
Play The Ball Speed & Control 2			Int' Dev'	Opt' Max'	Max'
Dummy Half Moving Pass 2			Int' Dev'	Opt' Max'	Max'



3. An Approach to Skills Development

Performing to the best of your ability

Great performances don't just happen. Indeed, performance in any sport at the highest level is the result of paying attention to three specific areas:

- The extent to which your athletes are physically prepared
- Their psychological readiness to compete
- The level of skill that your players or team are capable of performing to

So therefore performance, or should I say great performance, is:

- Skill level + physical preparation + psychological readiness

Having said that, the importance of each of these factors will differ depending on which sport you are taking part in.

For instance, let's look at a marathon runner. They most certainly would have worked physically, aerobically, and developed high levels of muscular endurance. I think it's also a fair bet that to run for twenty-six miles on your own and experience the pain barriers and thresholds that they probably go through requires a marathon runner to be mentally tough.

But on a personal note, I don't see any skill in running marathons unless having the ability to run efficiently for long periods of time is a skill.

An Approach To Coaching Rugby League

So two out of three and you could be the best marathon runner the world has ever seen.

There are also some wonderful darts players out there but realistically I can't see them turning up at the gym or running round the streets. However, the other two factors are a must. They have to be mentally prepared, able to relax at the 'oche', shut out all the noise and distractions, and skills wise, dart throwing is precise requiring hours and hours of developing hand/eye coordination and perfecting the ability to repeatedly hit the target.

Again, two out of three and we've got a champion.

Not so in Rugby League. At the top level all aspects must be developed. You cannot play this game devoid of muscle, particularly beyond your formative years.

The adult game is about confrontation so you must be mentally prepared.

And to consistently compete at the highest level demands skilful players, and that's what we, as coaches, particularly when working with the young, should be concentrating our efforts on.

A further examination would reveal that within the professional game, certainly at the full time clubs, everyone is on their way towards producing the same athlete.

The elite players are all fast, all strong, all mobile, all agile and all hostile. In other words, the athletes are almost the same.

So therefore, when all things are equal, skill becomes KING.

It would be helpful to forget such words as talent, ability or technique for now. Indeed, how many times have you heard it? “That kid’s got some talent, he’s got bags of ability, and technically he’s sound.”

Well, they are just labels – labels that relate to or describe proficiency in sport.

And whilst on the subject of skill, it’s not a gift from God nor do you inherit skills. You acquire them.

A good definition of skill would be having the ability to achieve the desired result whilst exhibiting a consistency and an efficiency of both time and effort.

In other words, having the ability to do the right thing at the right time – over and over again.

Skill is the result of endless hours of practice. No one emerges from the womb throwing out fifteen metre pinpoint spin passes or kicking fifty metre field goals.

It is only when you’ve mastered the basic skills such as balance, walking, hand/eye and hand/foot/eye coordination that we all have to master, can we even start out to develop other skills.

Sporting ability emerges early in life. Once you’ve developed the general abilities just mentioned, add to them a good eye and a retentive memory, then you have the corner stones from which to develop more advanced skills.

Skill development involves understanding what you want to achieve and allying it to the physical responses required to make it happen.

By way of an example, the swerve, attack and position the defender on the inside (skill). Then speed to win the foot race on the outside (physical response).

Examine the skills involved in passing and you’ll find that, by varying the body position, the angle at which you release the ball and the force that you apply to the pass will obviously have a direct influence on the:

- Speed
- Distance
- Direction in which the ball travels.

So the way in which we learn and further develop the skill is by comparing what you wanted to happen as opposed to what actually happened and then adjusting accordingly.

Then, in theory, the more passes you make, then the more the skill is developed.

Having said all that, it’s important when working with players that you identify very early their skill deficiencies as it’s a pointless exercise spending hours practising the skills they are very good at and paying little or no attention to programmes of rehabilitation or development.

Having acquired or developed an arsenal of skills, then how easy are they to retain?

Once developed, even with a minimum of practice, skills can be maintained, but a word of warning – skills will not stay with you forever - you must practice.

Lack of practice will affect skill retention. Practice is vital in developing or maintaining skills.

Use them – or lose them!

The skills drill is a useful coaching tool and has a role to play in the development of skill.

Let’s take a simple example; I call it the Auckland square. It begins with four players at each corner of the grid. Two balls in action, with players commuting across the grid and exchanging a pass. It’s a warm up drill that requires and assists in the development of:

- Communication
- Timing
- Good peripheral vision
- Handling skills.

Indeed there are several ways of executing it:

- Pass to right
- Pass to left
- Pop a pass
- Low passes
- High passes
- Mixture of passes etc.

And it goes on. You can make it a conditioner – by the length of time you run it for, or by instructing your players to come in at different stations.

Pressure can be further added to the drill in several ways:

- Reducing the size of the grid
- Adding additional equipment
- More balls
- Introduce opposition (shields).

In fact, when using skill drills, imagination is the only limit.

So when planning your sessions, you really are the key to it all. Skill practices that cater for individuals and the team as a whole need to be carefully thought out. And all skill sessions should be of an intensity, duration and frequency that would allow you to achieve your objectives.

This is because inappropriate practice is just as bad as no practice at all. Once in motion all skills practice must be coached throughout, otherwise poor techniques may well be practised over and over again.

Skills that players cannot master in their complete form should be broken down into their component values and eventually piece by piece be put back together again.

Unopposed practices are useful, but Rugby League is a confrontational sport and once you are confident that your players can perform a skill adequately then an element of opposition is an obvious development.

There is also conclusive proof that practising skills mentally, developing the ability to visualise certain game situations and carrying out skills positively is another way of supplementing physically learning skills.

At all times remember:

- Never sacrifice quality within your sessions.
- Perfect demonstrations are a must.
- Allow players to practise and learn when they are fresh mentally and physically.
- Make sure practices are realistic and wherever possible developed to be game related.

And finally, mentor feedback:

How am I doing?

What do I do well?

What do I need to work on?

Why do I need to work on it?

How do I work on it?

This is undoubtedly where you, the coach, play your most important part.

Having the ability to:

- Identify player deficiencies
 - Prioritise them
 - Work on one area at a time
 - Set logical and progressive tasks that facilitate correction, skill development and advancement.
- ENDS

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4.

An Approach to Coaching the Modified Game

Coaching for Tomorrow

Coaching for tomorrow is exactly what it says it is. Coaches working in the Modified Game are the ones that undoubtedly put the first impressions of this great game onto the next generation of players and in doing so, in my opinion, have got the most important role in the game of Rugby League.

However, equally important is that they get it right.

How easy would it be if every would-be young player had a complete mastery of the game's core skills and displayed all the physical attributes of an athlete able to play our sport?

I am, of course, talking of players who would also have the ability.

The role of the Modified Game coach is not to coach for today. It is exactly what I have already alluded to, and that is undoubtedly that of coaching for tomorrow.

For the Modified Game's coach is at the beginning of a process, and should they get it right, then there is more chance further down the line that others will get it right. The quality of work done will mean they will be dealing with a better informed and better prepared young player.

And yes, it's nice to win and winning undoubtedly is an important part of a child's development but winning in a young player's formative years can

be achieved in many ways apart from the obvious.

So - "Do the basic things exceptionally well in preference to doing the exceptional things basically well", a quote attributed to Bill Sweetenham, British Swimming Performance Director.

How do we create tomorrow's champions?

The Modified Game and the Long-term Athlete Development Model provide clear guidelines as to the role coaches should play throughout the continuum of a player's development. There are certain things that our young players need to be exposed to at certain stages of their development and our job is to facilitate precisely that process.

So, in essence, coaching and skills development within the Modified Game has a quite clearly defined job description.

In terms of skill there is a Skills checklist:

- Passing
- Scoring a try
- Playing the ball
- Tackling
- Goal kicking
- Passive scrum
- Field kicking
- Static marker
- The introduction of a little structure.

Everything on the checklist is representative of the game's fundamental skills, and the underpinning rules of the small sided game are also weighted in a way that allows the kids to practice, refine and develop the same.

And if by the time the kids eventually leave to go and play the full version of the game, they can't do or perform these core activities exceptionally well, then we have failed them, for they really are the tools of tomorrow.

And if they can, a question;

If all the players can perform all of the basic skills exceptionally well, what then is the by-product of that and why?

They would win games of course. Winning would become the by-product of being able to perform the core skills exceptionally well.

And why?

Because better coaching has led to producing better players - young players exhibiting skills and developing athletic ability that ultimately leads to better results!

This is Coaching for Tomorrow.

For undoubtedly, the foundations of future participation are established in childhood and adolescence, and a fundamental part of any Modified Games coach's philosophy should be to:

Assist in developing a healthy lifestyle, overseeing their preparation and encouraging their future participation in Rugby League.

When physically developing youngsters to play the sport, the first thing that is important to remember is that we are coaching children not adults!

Undoubtedly, they have different needs and coaching in all sports. Britain recognises that and has adopted a model to cater for it.

Stages of the Long-term Athlete Development Model:

- FUNdamentals
- Learning to train
- Training to train
- Training to compete
- Training to win.

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The Long-term Athlete Development Model is just like the skills checklist. It can't be any clearer as to how and where Modified Games coaches play their part.

They operate at the fundamentals stage and at the beginnings of learn to train stages and physical preparation should revolve around the FUNdamentals of fitness.

The Modified Games coach should be concerned with movement literacy - the child's overall physical development:

- Agility, Balance and Coordination
- Running, Catching, Passing and Kicking.

Also, there is consideration of the child's cognitive and emotional development by raising their self-esteem and in doing so creating the feel good factor.

Because of the differences that do exist between that of a young developing player and that of structuring sessions for adults, could I suggest these considerations when working with your Modified Games youngsters:

- Ease into warm-ups.
- Slow progressions.
- Perform skills at a lower intensity.
- Only small, short bursts of activity, followed by a rest.
- Always have a drink ready.
- Intersperse activity with frequent breaks.

Within your session you should also consider:

- Concentrating on skill and in doing so never ignore those who appear to lack skill – they may be late developers.
- Always structure your groups to be of similar ability, age, weight and size.
- Introduce the kids to a range of mobility or agility fun type exercises.
- Be sure that any contact is introduced carefully.
- Always avoid including any heavy loads or interval (lactic) type training.

So, in summary, what I've actually said is that the good Modified Games coach should concentrate on:

- Skill, FUN and enjoyment
- Training that is appropriate to the child's development
- Planning, preparation and delivery in a safe environment
- Steady rather than exposure to intense exercise
- Short bursts of activity with variety.

The reward for your efforts and expertise comes later in life. You have passed the youngsters on to the thirteen a side version of the game with all core attributes physically and skilfully under way. You may then see someone, with whom you have been involved, evolve into one of the game's great players.

It's not a quick fix. It does take time and we may have to wait ten or twelve years to see our piece of the action come to fruition, but it will be worth it!
ENDS

Notes



5. An Approach to Game Based Training

Rugby League is a great game and I'm sure you do not need me to convince you of that.

However, have you ever taken the time out to consider just what the real attraction to the young players involved is? And in doing so, also to consider or try to recall, the number of times at training that your players have asked this question, "Hey coach; when can we have a game?"

Actually, it's within this simple and frequently made request that leads us to just exactly what the game's major attraction is.

It's the game itself.

Kids want to play. If we further consider this then it should also tell us that within the game we actually have the ideal learning environment for our players, because their motivation to learn, comes from play or in situations that bare a direct relevance to 'the game'. And therefore our job as coaches is to replicate and facilitate that learning.

The concept known as 'game sense' is an approach to coaching that uses the playing of games to be the major focus of each practice session. By concentrating on the game (not necessarily the full game), players will develop in a number of ways including an increased tactical awareness and therefore will be able to make better decisions during the game.

Players will start to think more strategically about game concepts and by developing skills within a

realistic and enjoyable context, other than practising them in isolation, ultimately should develop a greater understanding of the game being played.

This approach to coaching is 'game centred' rather than 'technique centred'. Whilst most traditional coaching sessions in the past have focused on the practice of techniques, the game sense session uses the game as its focus and by using this approach players are challenged to think about what they are actually doing, and why they are doing it.

With regard to the development of technique, then it is developed at the right time within situations that take place in the game.

Coaches, for many years, have used drills based skills and activities to develop our young players. There are countless coaching manuals and videos on the market that have thousands of drills in them mimicking every possible skill. However, just how effective are they in achieving our desired outcomes as coaches and more importantly how relative are they to the game?

In examining drills based coaching, we need to be comfortable in our response to certain questions.

Through the use of a series of skills drills, are we really teaching our players to play the game? How do the drills we use contribute to or transfer to, on field skill? Do they contain the variants that actually occur during the game or are we realistically, just using them as activities and 'fillers' at training?

Initially, the introduction of any new drill will be met with enthusiasm but once the players have established how a drill works and can master its components, what is it that then keeps the kids motivated or do drills just become a series of repetitive practices?

Therefore, another important question needs answering. Should drills based learning be consigned to the history books forever?

I don't think so, but the key is in the role you play coaching throughout the practice. I will give you an example.

Defence Square, on the face of it, is a simple defensive warm up or practice. Very easy to set up, requires minimal instruction and soon all your players are in motion.

Two to the left
Two to the right
Two to meet opposition in the middle.

How easy is that?

Realistically though, it's absolutely useless! If no coaching takes place within the practice it's the simplest of drills, yet it has so much technique that needs addressing otherwise poor technique and habit will transfer onto the field of play.

Are they going forward before they slide?
Is there a cohesive line?
Are they communicating?
Are they nominating?
Are they equating numbers?
What's their method of retreat?

A lot of coaching otherwise poor technique will be developed. So drills are not consigned to the bin. You can and would use them as:

- Warm up activities
- To breakdown and learn new techniques
- To correct poor technique.

They are important when introducing technique in small or component parts.

For example, a new player learning how to tackle could be exposed to a drill where they learn the approach phase of the tackle in isolation initially. Another drill may well then develop the contact

phase. And a further practice may facilitate the learning of the finish phase.

Once competence of each component has been established then you may progress to a practice that puts all three phases together.

But in order to compete successfully in a game situation, the techniques previously learned need to be further developed to become skills, and a simple formula indicates that:

Technique + Pressure = SKILL

And an obvious progression that would allow us to pressurise the technique and therefore develop the skill is games based training.

Remember that it's the big attraction. The kids want to play and from our perspective as coaches, it affords us the opportunity to progress their development through the use of appropriate Designer Games.

So, what are Designer Games? And in setting up such practices, what are the ingredients or key features?

Each practice should have an outcome. What aspect, tactic or skills are you trying to develop within the game?

What is it that you are concentrating on within your game? Is it a particular playing position, a number of players in a unit eg. left sided attack, or a particular skill?

Consideration should also be given to any modification or exaggerations to the practice that would best set up the various situations. And then when the game is in motion, what are the key questions that need to be asked to establish the players' understanding and therefore facilitate their learning?

So in summary, a successful Designer Game must relate to situations that occur in the full game and in doing so incorporate elements of decision making that facilitate a transfer of skill from training to the game. In other words, meet your desired outcomes.

A traditional coaching template for structuring coaching sessions looks something like this:

- Warm up
- Small sided game, probably relative to the previous coaching session
- Skills development
- Small sided game relative to skill taught
- Cool down and debrief.

A games based model would differ in this way:

- Warm up
- Explanation - what are we trying to do?
- Game sense game
- Evaluate the activity
- Question, feedback and adjustment
- Game sense game continued
- Progression and additional challenges
- Cool down and debrief.

So in essence, when comparing the two approaches to coaching then our initial start point is no different - an appropriate warm up. However, thereafter, from a game sense point of view, we continue with a clear explanation of what we are trying to achieve within our designer game (how is it played, what are the rules, modifications and desired outcomes?)

That having been done, the game is then put into action. Whilst the game is in motion, there is an opportunity to evaluate the activity, offer feedback and outline any adjustments or refinements necessary to the players in order to improve the game.

Feedback given, then restart the game, and assuming everything is going to plan then there is further opportunity to introduce progressions and additional challenges.

That done, the session culminates in a cool down and debrief.

The coach's role in this model is to act as a facilitator, who creates within each game situation a learning environment whereby the players have to work out solutions for themselves which is; Experiential Learning.

In terms of facilitating experiential learning, that is done once the game is in motion by promoting a series of key questions that would assist the players to recognise situations and select the right options to meet the game requirement.

The types of questions revolve around the What, Why, How and When of each situation.

So, for example, during our game edge defence (unit game) our winger is marking a faster opponent. Relevant questions may well be:

- What defensive role would be the best to adopt? – outside leaving no space.
- Why would you do that? – to force him back inside.
- How would you do that? - always positioned so as to deny him outside space.
- When would you do that? – once the threat was identified.

That is just one scenario, together with an appropriate line of questioning, in a game designed to help your winger identify solutions and make appropriate decisions.

Other scenarios may require different questions - the: What ifs.....How would you?....Could we do?.....What did you see there?.....

I trust you get a feel of where I am coming from and I am confident that in this kind of environment coaches can accelerate players' learning by providing and coaching through situational experiences. **ENDS**



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6.

An Approach to Mentoring in Rugby League

We have all at some stage or another been involved in a mentoring relationship whether we know it or not.

I am quite sure that we can all recollect experiences where we have been asked for advice, or maybe, we have sought some guidance ourselves from a more experienced coach or someone that we naturally leant towards, trusted or felt comfortable with.

Does that sound familiar?

Well, we may not have recognised it at the time but those experiences, those involvements where informal mentoring.

So mentoring is nothing new. It's been around since time began and it's not unique to sport. Mentoring can and does take place in all kinds of relationships and situations.

The word Mentor is of Greek origin and means friend or trusted adviser, or more to the point a critical friend and a trusted adviser.

A recent conference on the 'Future of Sport' clearly identified the development of better coaches as the most important element in any blueprint for the growth and betterment of sport in general and mentoring is an obvious avenue to assist in achieving this aim.

However, mentor coaches are currently given little or no guidelines on how to perform the role and quite clearly one of the difficulties associated with the practical application of coaching is the

relative absence of direct support for the new or developing coach at an operational level.

The coaching model essentially consists of the three processes of planning, delivery and review.

The delivery phase of coaching can indeed be a very lonely and confidence lowering activity when things are not going well. If mentoring is to be a useful, long-term mechanism to assist in the development of future coaches, then it must be developed, and people trained for it.

In implementing such a programme then, mentoring does offer a number of opportunities and challenges for Rugby League. Amongst them:

- Use of existing expertise and experience within the game
- New learning for both mentor and mentee
- Opportunities to share knowledge
- The re-energising of experienced coaches who become involved as mentors
- The creation of enthusiasm and commitment through involvement
- The deployment and retention of existing coaches.

And in summarising the above, I think it is fair to say that mentoring does tap into existing expertise and experience from within the game. In fact, experienced coaches are a very much under utilised resource. Twenty years of coaching experience cannot be bought at the local supermarket. It can only be obtained by doing the job for that period of time.

From both personal experience and by talking to other people, who have been trained and involved in mentoring roles, I can honestly say that coaches do become re-energised when faced with the challenges and involvement within coach development.

A mentoring involvement can contribute to the development of enthusiasm through commitment, and with that it can create mutual environments that are conducive to shared knowledge and opportunities for mentee coaches to learn and develop.

In Rugby League terms, the first thing we need to understand is that the mentoring process can take place across a whole range of levels and it can be as simple as:

- A friendship that exists involving coaches who are working together in a club or team environment.
- It may even be the supervision of a particular coach who is seeking further accreditation or advancement.
- The fast tracking of an identified coach who is operating in the performance environment of the sport could also be another scenario.

It is also important in recognising the benefits of mentoring, and the skills required by both mentor and mentee who are involved in any such relationship, that whatever the situation, it should be as a result of an agreed relationship that requires interaction and commitment from both parties with a purpose that leads to a desired outcome.

Should this not be agreed to at the outset and carefully managed and entered into in the right spirit, then inevitably there are pitfalls.

It may seem an understatement but there does need to be an initial pairing followed by a meeting. Matching a mentor and mentee can be a simple process but it can also be problematic if they are not suitably matched or agree to the arrangement personally.

Amongst the skills required to mentor, I would suggest they include having the ability to:

- Create a supportive environment, establish trust, communicate, evaluate needs.
- Offer accurate feedback and present it in a way that does not give solutions but rather points to certain options or ideas.

If these are the skills, then amongst the mentor's responsibilities are ensuring that the mentee undoubtedly is the centre of the relationship. If desired outcomes are to be achieved it is crucial that the mentee is also empowered with driving the relationship. It is also important to allow the mentee time to seek out solutions to any problems that they may encounter. During all of this, the mentor's major responsibility is in supporting this process.

In order to facilitate all of this then, the mentor's understanding of the learning process is important. No two people are the same and one of the primary skills of mentoring is in having the ability to understand and deploy appropriate strategies to assist in the learning of those that you are mentoring.

The mentor would also do well to remember that every coach has a unique approach to communicating with their players and this of course is reflective of their own individual personality.

Mentoring must permit that individuality to remain except where it has an adverse effect on the future of the player coach relationship.

With regard to mentee responsibilities, then top of their list is driving the process forward, taking some ownership and responsibility for their own learning, remaining focused on their goals, being open minded and questioning if necessary to any feedback given. They need to be mindful at all times that it is they who are responsible for determining any future actions.

Finally, what are the potential pitfalls?

What are the likely ingredients that could contribute to an unsuccessful mentor/mentee experience?

These could be:

- Lack of commitment from either or both parties
- Not having stated and agreed goals
- Not listening to each other
- Coach stubbornness in the face of substantial evidence that change is required
- Destructive, rather than constructive criticism
- The mentor continually telling the mentee what to do.

Any of this and the likelihood is that the relationship will break down. **ENDS**



7. An Approach to Short Term Coaching

Once coaches reach a certain level or standing in Rugby League, then it is quite likely they may be invited to work with a side preparing to play within a representative framework.

I might suggest that the opportunity to prepare this side in no way resembles the work you do at your club on a weekly, monthly or seasonal basis.

Preparation when working with a representative team can and does vary. For example, you may have two or three two-hour get togethers, a two-day camp or even meet today – play tomorrow. Whatever the scenario, it is less than ideal. Even if you are afforded a number of sessions over a period of time, then that too can create its own set of problems. The bigger the gap between sessions, then the harder it is to attain a rhythm.

Although coaches, in my experience, always want more time with their players, the reality when working in 'rep' football is that you've not got it! Therefore management of the time you have got is crucial, and from the outset you must have very clear objectives.

Coaching in this environment, as previously mentioned, is not like the work done at your club. The planning done at club level is of a lesser significance because the reality is that you have got every day to improve. Improvement in performance at club level can be gradual. It can be over a season or any given period of time.

However, as coach to a 'rep' side, you need your sessions to have an immediate and dramatic effect on performance and in order to achieve

that, then you must be clear on the key techniques and tactics that you wish to employ. I believe that the key to your success may well be in your ability to create an environment built on communication with your players and mutual trust.

Every person involved in the team should know exactly what is happening, but more importantly be empowered and have a feeling of ownership for what is to become his or her part in your strategy.

All of this is because players have to believe in what they are doing and you as coach should also believe in the team. You can do anything to shape and prepare your side, but you can't take the next step and cross the whitewash with them.

In other words it's back to trust again. You have got to rely on your players to deal with the job at hand.

So how is it possible as a coach, in a short space of time, to create an effect?

And what is it when outlining your strategy, that the players:

- Need to know?
- Must know?
or indeed is -
- Nice to know.

In short term situations I think it is fair to say 'nice to know' is a non-starter.

The information for preparation that you need to impart most certainly falls into the need and must know/must do categories.

For example, the last representative side I prepared involved just two training sessions. My clear objectives were that the first session would need to be classroom based. This would afford me the opportunity to meet the players, discuss football and explore a simple model within a theory session, where, as coach, I have the opportunity to outline ideas. From the discussions and agreed outcomes I would then formulate areas for our game preparation.

In my experience, and in such situations, it's not what you say; it's how you say it.

My approach to this session was to outline and broker exactly how I wanted them to play, but in doing so:

- Empower the players
- Give them ownership
- Involve them in making significant decisions
- Give them genuine input into the creation of any game plan we chose to adopt (however simple that may be).

Again, in my experience, short-term strategies require simplicity.

Having done that, my first objective had been met. The players had bought in and I was now more confident that our agreed principles, skills and tactics would be carried out.

When we took the field of play, we would look like a football team, (How important is that to a coach?) and hopefully, have more than a strong chance of producing a positive result.

Theory session over – situational field practice to go. The only opportunity we have to lock in agreed plans. It is now a matter of prioritising the areas, defensively, offensively and within our kicking strategy that need to be practiced.

However, overall it is even more fundamental than that. It is really about adhering to certain principles and recognising that the modern game is all about applying pressure, and that this is achieved by adhering to what I call The Five Ps – six if you include the word PRINCIPLES because that's what they are.

- POSSESSION – you must control what you've got and turn it over only on your terms.
- POSITION – is what you will achieve assuming you control the football or turn it over how and where you wanted.
- Effective use of possession and position will allow you the opportunity to apply PRESSURE – offensively or defensively.
- Now PATIENCE is needed because no one scores every time they get the football.
- A smart team will force the second best option – a back to back set which means more possession – more than likely in a good position and an opportunity to apply more pressure which inevitably leads to POINTS.

Having said that, pressure is a two-edged blade. As well as knowing how to apply it, you also need to know how to absorb and relieve it.

Having just explored a short-term strategy, based on minimum preparation time for a one off fixture, the next step in short term coaching is the opportunity to prepare a touring side.

Obviously, there will be more time to prepare – let's say six months of periodical get together culminating in a four-week tour.

In order to prepare this team to perform to the best of their ability, certain areas of preparation must to be implemented.

They fall possibly into five categories. These are the Physical, Mental, Skilful, Tactical and Player Welfare issues. These can be rounded up into the four distinct areas of:

- Tour management and logistics
- The coaching environment
- Sports science and
- Sports medicine.

And if you are fortunate and funding permits, then the make up of your staff may include:

- Manager
- Head Coach
- Assistant Coaches (2)
- Doctor
- Physiotherapist
- Conditioner and
- Sports Psychologist.

I might suggest that your role as Head Coach has now changed significantly. You will now need to manage and utilise the back-up team, have a thorough knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of each member of staff and indeed an awareness of where some responsibilities are likely to cross over.

This team, as well as the football team, is now become part of your everyday environment and you need to plan accordingly.

What is it that each member of your staff is responsible for?

- Pre tour
- On tour and
- Post tour.

The lists of considerations are endless. Planning now becomes the key and the devil is in the detail.

Listed below is an example of Head Coach roles and responsibilities. The list, I might suggest, is not exhaustive but it is equally important that similar templates are produced for each member of staff.

HEAD COACH RESPONSIBILITIES

– Pre Tour

- Confirm appointment of relevant coaching staff
- Set up planning meeting
- Agree training schedule
- Playing squad
- Philosophy
- Team vocabulary
- Roles and responsibilities
- Working practice
- Liaison with all other staff on a regular basis
- Identify suitable training venues
- Construct appropriate programmes
- Physical
- Mental/team building
- Bonding
- Codes of Conduct
- Tactical
- Identify appropriate opposition (warm up games)
- Prepare players' manual.

On Tour

Meet with all relevant personnel on a daily basis.

Coaching Team

- Training schedules and requirements
- Remedial and progressive practices
- Tactics
- Selection
- Previews – reviews
- Player interviews: individual/unit/team

Sports Science

- Weights programme
- Designer games
- Training intensity
- Hydration/nutrition
- Mental skills programmes: individual and collective

Sports Medicine

- Updates
- Prehab
- Rehab
- Fitness testing programmes
- Player welfare

Management and Logistics

- Transportation
- Facilities
- Equipment
- Finance
- Disciplinary issues
- Activities (free time)
- Obligations (to hosts)

Media

- Interviews
- Reports

Post Tour

Produce a comprehensive report that includes information on:

- Players
- Staff
- Facilities
- Performance
- Recommendations

Feedback to:

- Players
- Clubs
- Coaches
- All members of staff.

ENDS



8. An Approach to Defensive Preparation

The great game of Rugby League flatters itself with its simplicity. There are really only two major situations that exist.

Either you have possession of the football or you have not.

Having said that your ability to play and compete when not in possession of the football will undoubtedly have a huge bearing on the outcome in any game.

To reference a number of the game's leading coaches; defence is fast becoming the ultimate team activity

I also concur with the opinion that it takes a far more athletic individual to play good defence than good offence.

Students of the game will tell you that most of the tackle misses in the major competitions are not for lack of effort or determination but rather through a deficiency of sound technique.

So where do we begin our defensive preparation?

Defence is a team's responsibility; tackling is an individual's responsibility.

Should you read between the lines, what this statement is actually saying is, if you can't tackle then you are going to struggle to defend.

It is obvious where the start point to any defensive preparation should begin and that is with 'individual tackling technique'.

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However, the outcome overall, and your philosophy in the first instance, should be to prepare a defence that fulfils your goals and aspirations as a coach. More importantly, in doing so should take into consideration the abilities of the team to create a defence, Individually and collectively, that can adapt to each situation and in every conceivable scenario whether it be player on player, in and around the ruck area, on the fringe or at the edge.

If we agree that the core of any defence lies in each individual's ability to have sound techniques, then tackling can be broken into three distinct areas:

- Approach
- Contact and
- Finish

Approach – good go forward movement, position the ball carrier, read the situation, and select the appropriate tackle.

Contact – impact, shoulder into target area, grip and handle.

Finish – on top of the ball carrier, work the floor, regaining your feet first, alive and ready for the next phase of play.

I read a quote in a recent publication:

“The ruck is the centre of the universe.”

The inference being, I assume that if you win the floor then you'll win the game. And, in my menu of approach, contact and finish, I have indicated just that.

However, within the macro cycle that is approach, contact and finish, there is a micro cycle that consists of:

- Balance
- Good footwork
- Timing.

Prior to contact - Good balance is essential to counteract the various lines and angles of run and late movements from one shoulder to the other adopted by the ball carrier. Ally that to the use of good footwork, which in itself is an essential component of the approach and contact phases of the tackle (shorter steps and correct positioning of your feet upon impact) and if you are to get the desired result, then it is all about timing.

Winning the floor is effective tackling. Timing will help you generate and maximise power into the collision during the contact and finish phases of the tackle.

Allying sound technique with the ability to put your opponent at a disadvantage and subsequently “win the floor” is a major theme that should run throughout your defensive preparation.

Below is a list of rhetorical questions, which should lead to the identification of considerations and areas of work when formulating your defensive strategy.

- How do you line up defensively?
- Who goes where and why?
- How do we go forward? – How do we retreat?
- What is the width of your line relative to the different areas of the field?
- How do you defend when you have the opposition in their twenty metres?
- How different is that to defending your own twenty metres?
- How do you defend the middle sixty percent of the field?
- What marker system do you employ?
- Is it just the one system, or are there changes as you move through the field of play?

- Do you use adjustable defenders, in and out of the line, some of the time, all of the time or a bit of both? Or alternatively, do you adopt a pendulum system using a combination of the wings and the full back to negotiate through the line options?
- What defensive pattern movements do you operate? Up and in, up and out, a bit of both, up and hold, man on man, shortened line or are your players capable of playing combinations to cater for what's in front of them?
- How much work is done on communication, nomination and having the ability to equate numbers?
- How do we defend scrums?
- How do we defend restarts of play?
- What about kick defence?
- Do we practice closing gaps for grubbers, behind the line work for chip kicks, escorting duties and protection for bombs?
- What's the strategy for negating 40/20s?
- How do we stop the opposition when they are on the front foot?
- Do we ever practice scrambling defence?
- What about the psychology of it all? How do you create intimidation and smart aggression?

The list is not exhaustive; it is just my attempt to outline some of the many considerations you have as a coach when preparing your defensive strategies.

Based on this approach to defensive preparation, would our defensive cycle from tackle to tackle look something like this?

- Go forward
- Communicate
- Nominate
- Impact
- Technique
- Floor work
- Unload the tackle
- Read and react – go where needed
- Recovery
- Go forward - again.

ENDS



9.

An Approach to Developing Attacking Strategy

In my previous article on defensive preparation, I identified as our start point individual tackle technique and I would suggest that it's no different when formulating your approach to the game with 'ball in hand'.

You can only begin your preparation at the beginning, by identifying the core attacking ingredients that players need to possess, which eventually will underpin your overhaul attacking strategies.

Core skills, such as passing, play the ball, kicking, footwork, lines and angles of run, are obvious start points for consideration but within each of the identified areas, come huge amounts of work on the technique that underpins every component in each of the recognised skills.

For example, if I was to benchmark just one of the skills such as passing, then how much work is there to be done in that area alone?

Passing:

- The Grip - how to hold the ball
- The Carry - one and two handed carries
- The Pass - basic pass - short pass - long pass - spin pass
- Pass from the floor - standing pass - moving
- Pass - weighting the pass - timing the pass
- The Catch - early - late - standing - moving.

Undoubtedly, your players need to be proficient in every aspect of each component of the skill.

It is the same with all other core activities, because the reality is:

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- Without mastering the simple skills, it is impossible to take performance to a higher level so core skills work is the foundation of preparation.

Where to next then?

Positional Specific Work.

What is it?

Quite simply, it is the core skills and activities relative to the various playing positions. These need to be practiced in isolation initially and then in combination with other players who carry out similar roles that interact during the game.

For example, positional specific groupings:

- Front row - 8 and 10
- Back row - 11- 12 and 13
- Organisers - 7 - 6 and 9
- Centres - 3 and 4
- Back triangle - 1 - 2 and 5

Menus of activity relative to each playing position need to be created and implemented into your programme.

By way of example, a programme of practices for a full back may well include:

- High ball
- Ground ball
- In- goal retrievals
- Pocket and turn chase returns
- Ruck and wide play supports.

During season a typical week may look something like this:

Diagram 3

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
GAME DAY	REVIEW Individual Groups Team	REST OR extra core or position specific isolation OR group	PREVIEW Information distribution position or situational work strategy based	REST core or position isolation or group	STRATEGY Situational opposed team run through	STRATEGY Situational Final game preparation

Having put into place the building blocks to support your attacking plans, what's now needed is a coat hanger on which to hang it all. We need to develop a strategy.

Strategies are simply guidelines that give structure to the plans you formulate. They are usually based on principles of play that reflect and display aspects of your coaching philosophy.

Strategies should be reviewed and adjusted if necessary, to suit your current thinking as to how the game should be played.

However, any strategy should be mindful of, and cater for, the skills and abilities, strengths and weaknesses of your playing personnel.

How often you adjust or make changes is entirely your call. It may be on a weekly basis or dependent on whom you play but by and large, the infrastructure (principles, stock plays and team vocabulary) will remain the same.

Considerations that could have an impact on your strategy on a regular basis would include such things as:

- The opposition - their strength and weakness
- Injuries and unavailability to your squad
- The formulation and rotation of your bench.
- Match conditions - venue - officials
- The score!

I would suggest also that your strategy display some of these primary coaching objectives:

- Go forward - How important is that? It's a yardage game!

- Recognition, reaction and understanding of:
 - What's in front of you?
 - Who's in front of you?
 - Where do you need to carry the football?
 - Which space do you need to lead into, to cause an effect?
 - Domination of field position
 - Create a platform to play off
 - Build and sustain pressure
 - Create positive finishes
 - Pressure kicking game
 - Repeat sets
 - Score
 - Preview and Review.

I cannot emphasise enough just how important these two elements are, and indeed based on the information and evidence generated from preview and review, how they become the major cause of adjustment to any of your plans.

There are obviously many other considerations when putting together your full attacking strategy. They include:

- Personal qualities
- Leadership
- Roles and responsibilities.

These are the people considerations that need to be taken into account.

The various field plans that can be utilised to give direction to achieving positions from which to launch sustainable attacks are another consideration.

If coupled with the important elements of support play and decision making capability, they will only serve to capitalise on and maximise any go forward attacking strategies. **ENDS**



10. An Approach to Winning the Ruck

When watching the game on television, it is almost inevitable to hear every week one pundit or another talking about 'winning the ruck' or 'winning the floor'.

For those involved or educated in Rugby League, it's not rocket science. The ruck is the most crucial area of the game and as such is given critical importance and detail during preparation.

In fact, it's well documented that the team that dominates the ruck area is the team that usually wins the game. Equally well documented is the statement that claims that the ruck is the 'Centre of the Universe'.

What I would like to explore in this section is the importance of dominating the ruck area and to look at practical ways as to how this can be achieved.

So, let's begin with a simple question:

What do we mean by 'winning the ruck'?

I think the answer to that is obvious. Given that Rugby League is a two dimensional sport, (either you've got possession of the ball or not) and by its very nature is an invasion game, then we are alluding to offensive or defensive dominance.

Assuming we are agreed on that descriptor, then let's explore just why it is important to win the ruck in either situation.

Offensively, winning the floor puts the opposition on the back foot and in retreat mode. They may

even have bodies still on the floor and that being the case defensively disorganised and unable to present in an uniformed manner for the next phase of play.

The effect of that will be to give the attack more space and more time to play off the front foot. A continuance of this kind of dominance builds and creates pressure both mentally as well as physically, creating doubt and uncertainty as well as tiring the opposition.

Next, how do you impose your dominance over the opposition and what are the identifiable components that allow you to dictate?

Assuming we are on our game and have won the floor, then our start point must be a quality dummy half pass. This may be a pass that is static from the ground or a moving dummy half pass with the emphasis being on recognising when and where to run.

Given our recognition of either situation then we need to be taking the ball flat on the advantage line, with support on either side. The emphasis here is in the timing of the run to marry with the static or rolling situation.

As we approach the defence, late footwork to avoid the collision and to put defenders at a disadvantage, with good body position that allows us to find the ground in the winning position of elbows and knees and once achieved a quality efficient play the ball is what is required.

Sounds simple but it's not. Don't forget the opposition is trying to prevent you from achieving this.



11. An Approach to Kicking

'Kicks win matches' and they always have, right back to the origins of the game of Rugby when in order to register points, you had to place the ball over the opposition's goal line to attempt a kick at goal (no tries in those days only kicks at goal).

Over time, and as the game moved forward, so kicking strategies have also evolved.

Note the major role kicking has played in the extraordinary success that the England Rugby Union team has experienced in becoming world cup winners. How much of that success can be attributed to the boot of Jonny Wilkinson?

During the evolution of kicking in Rugby League terms, then most certainly I can remember:

- Regular kicking duels between opposing fullbacks
- Teams implementing what was then the 'up and under' at what seemed every conceivable opportunity
- A realisation of the value of field kicking in order to change the focus of play from that of an offensive negative to a defensive positive. Not only can we now change the focus of play, but in doing so retain further possession in a prime attacking position (40/20).

As the game has continued to develop, with its rule changes, enhanced athletic ability and modes of play, so too other kicking tactics have also been deployed to counter:

- Better organised defences
- Instigate physical mismatches (tall versus small, isolated defender versus numbers)
- Regain possession (back to back sets).

Offensive and defensive kicking strategies now represent a major area of work for all coaches when preparing their teams.

You need to consider that in top class football a set of six tackles takes, on average, something between 48 to 57 seconds and each set more often than not culminates in a kick. So it therefore stands to reason, that during the game we are faced with 30 or more offensive kicks to execute, as well as a similar number that we need to defensively defuse.

Therefore, preparation, just like the strategies employed in defence and offence, can only begin at the beginning.

Indeed, some basic technical points apply to all kicks including how you hold and grip the ball, body movements and coordination, eyes, arms, legs, head, shoulders and finally foot contact and, in most cases, follow through.

The execution of the kick generally falls into three distinct phases: Preparation, Kick (execution) and Chase.

Each phase has a sub-menu of activity:

- Preparation: Call announced, advance the ball to a determined field position, protection and alternative kickers in place and chase teams aware and ready to go.
- Kick: Selection (which kick) displays all the right qualities dependent on the type of kick, good hang time if a bomb, good weight to allow chasers to attack the ball or get downfield.

- Chase: Good jumpers to attack the high ball, fringe players to react to loose ball or ball knocked down, quick players to chase and attempt to recover possession and all players who know and understand kicking strategy and priorities.

On the obverse side of that coin, where all our kicking principles are important, the ability to defuse the kick is also paramount.

Kickers and outlet kickers should be challenged, protection should always be in place to assist catchers, whether it is in a block or covering position or alert and aware as a fringe player to recover possession or diffuse the situation.

Links should also be created at the back of the field to assist the full back and wingers in advancing the ball.

On the point of goal kicking, technically, how good are some of today's kickers in comparison to the greats of yesterday? Possibly the easiest way to try and make that comparison would be to examine the consistency of goal kickers in the modern era.

How good, for instance, was Daryl Halligan?

My recollection of his effort in the world club challenge in 1997, when his team was playing catch up against Wigan, was fantastic!

Andy Farrell and Paul Deacon, to mention two in the Super League competition, had extraordinary strike rates, but during my time at Wigan, I believe that I witnessed probably the most prolific goal kicker ever in modern day Rugby League, Frano Botica.

He rarely missed and when he did, it was met with either a gasp from the crowd or a stunned silence.

But his success rate was not by accident. As you would expect, it was by hours of methodical practice.

I believe that Frano knew at any time during the game whether or not to go for goal (dependent on the situation). I also believe that was down to success, or lack of, that he was experiencing during practice rounds, and the reason he knew was by focusing his kicking practice on a routine not too dissimilar to this:



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Diagram 4

FIELD TEMPLATE

Instruction and Information:

- Always warm up and stretch before kicking
- Practice by taking some shots from *, attempting to hit the upright prior to your kicking round
- All kicks from the designated positions
- You must kick two consecutive conversions before moving on to the next mark
- A maximum of six kicks at any given mark
- A perfect round equals sixteen kicks in total
- All kicks are taken from positions that you would be called on to attempt during the game – 4 and 8 for example are kicks from tries scored in the corner.

This system will help you identify your kicking strengths and deficiencies

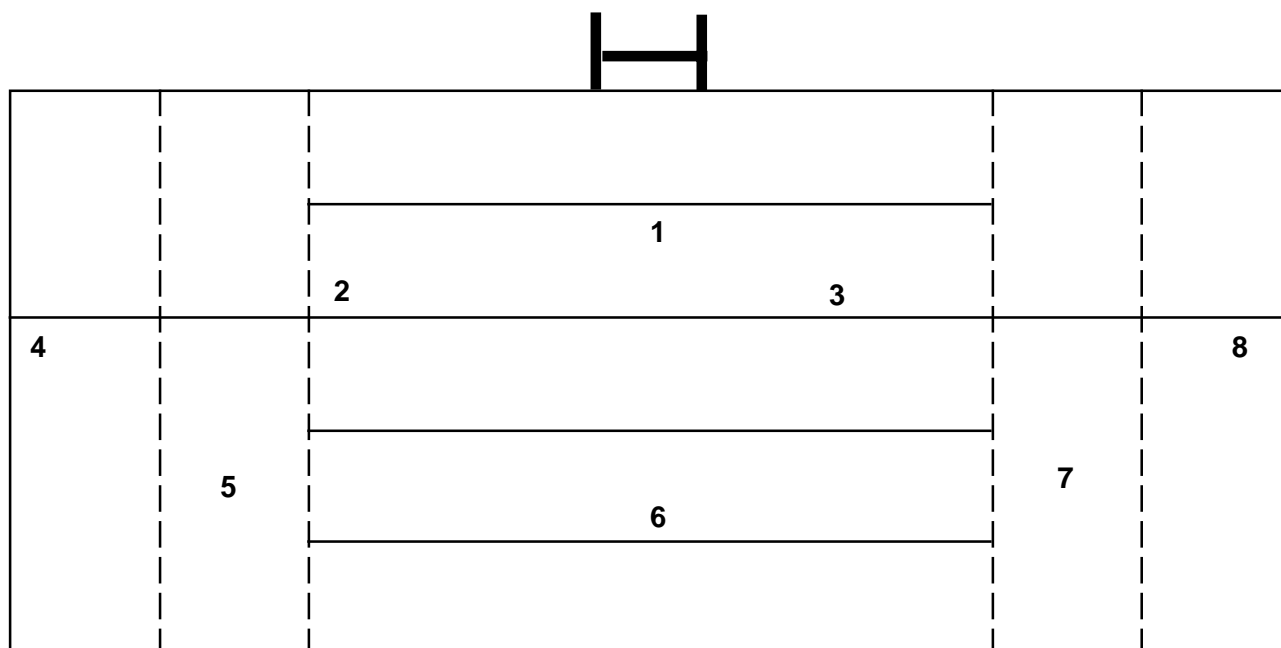


Diagram 5

BLANK SCORECARD

1.	2.	3.
4.	5.	6.
7.	8.	TOTAL
		%

Diagram 6

**HOW HAVE YOU SCORED?
(CONVERSION CHART)**

KICKS		%				KICKS		%
16		100	/ X //	//	/ X //	26		61
17		94				27		59
18		88				28		57
19		84	//	/ X X / X	//	29		55
20		80				30		53
21		76				31		51
22		72				32		50
23		69	/ X / X //	//	TOTAL	33		48
24		66			30	34		47
25		64			53%	35		45

Quite clearly, this approach to structuring kicking practice would identify areas on field where your kicker is experiencing more success than others, and yes, this would have relevance during game time.

However, the renaissance in successful kicking is the result of a number of factors not least coaches having to think about it and include it as an integral part of their weekly preparation. Most team's strategies now include a variety of kicks to implement that seek out positive outcomes.

As a conclusion and to underpin the importance of a quality kicking game, it is now not unusual to see leading clubs investing in and employing specialist kicking coaches to work with their players. ENDS



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11. An Approach to Kicking

Match plans. What are they? And do we really need them?

These are questions I often asked myself.

Given that most coaches will have a philosophy as to how the game should be played, and be aware of the principles that underpin it, both offensively and defensively, I think it is fair to say that they will have goals, aspirations and ambitions for their players and the team.

Should that be the case, is there a simple equation that reads:

Coaching philosophy + principles of play + goals and aspirations = match plans?

Assuming that becomes the background to our preparation:

- Do we just play
- Evaluate
- Refine and refocus where necessary
- Then play again.

Is it all as simple as that?

I certainly wouldn't complicate matters if working with young and developing players.

Then the game plan I would adopt for my modified game team would be simple. Enjoy it and have fun!

How good or appropriate is that?

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But having painted that picture for one scenario, then how different is it when working in a full time environment that in many ways is purely results and success orientated?

For example, it has not gone unnoticed that:

- Only two teams will contest the Grand Final, likewise the Challenge Cup Final, and currently it is a fair bet that you can pick any two from four or five clubs in Super League who are likely to do just that.
- Four clubs and you can probably name them, will contest and be at the top of the ladder throughout the season.
- Another four or five clubs are traditionally moving up or down the ladder contesting the spots between five and nine, and at the other end you've got the dogfight to stave off relegation.
- Should you pick an international side, it is also a fair bet that ninety percent of the players will come from the big four.

Hey! But that's life. That's the game and the business we are in, so when formulating your match plans, then you can only play the hand you are dealt.

For demonstration purposes, I am going to assume the role of head coach to one of the mid-table clubs, striving for a play off place.

My start point then to formulating my match plans, begins the moment I know:

- Who we play
- When we play
- And where we play.

So my first consideration is to analyse the fixture roster and honestly evaluate:

- The games I feel we can win
- The games we will struggle to win
- The games we must win.

I am aware that most coaches like to plan and, in doing so, feel that they can win every game.

However, that's not the reality in professional sport. Realistically, there are certain fixtures that try as you may, you are not going to get a result.

So, if you are a mid-table club wanting to retain your status in the premier playing league, it is important that you highlight the games you feel you've got a real chance in.

Then focus in on the games against your closest rivals - the teams that like yourselves are probably vying for those play-off places and they then become the games we must win. Any other

victories along the way (the big four) I would suggest become bonus points.

So my approach to match planning has started. I am now able to plan a training load with intensity and a volume that will help us to peak and come into targeted fixtures that we could or must win, both fresh, healthy and with fuel in the tank.

If I am smart, not only would my players be fresh going into key games, but also I would ensure that our selection policy meant that key players were not over exposed in other fixtures and thus available for those major must win games.

What I need to make clear from the start, is that I am not suggesting that in certain games we are not trying to win or that indeed we have given up on a result.

On the contrary, we always train and play to win, but realistically what I have now put in place is a:

- Training load
- Intensity
- Volume
- Selection policy.

That will bring us to certain fixtures with more than a fair chance of success.

Diagram 7 - EXAMPLE WEEKLY PLAN

MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
9.00am physio & Rehab	9.00am physio & Rehab	9.00am physio & Rehab	FREE DAY	9.00am physio & Rehab	9.00am physio & Rehab	
10.00am Pool Session	10.00am Review Individual video handout	10.00am Players one to ones, individual game tape reviews		10.00am Preview meeting & discussion	10.00am Meeting player tip sheets handouts	
Video Work Review cut	10.45am Weights				10.45am Final run through	
Organise individual game cuts	12 noon Lunch	12 noon Lunch		12 noon Lunch		1.45pm Meeting changing area
3.00pm Football staff meeting	2.00pm Core & Positional specific unit work	2.00pm Skills, agility & speed work Preview video cut		2.00pm Weights Prepare player tip sheets		2.40pm Warm up 3.00pm GAME

There are some strategies, not readily identifiable in the schedule, that run throughout the season and would probably require little or no adjustment whatever the game.

I refer to the:

- Mental programmes (that is adjustable, dependent on goal setting)
- Nutritional requirements (eating plan)
- Hydration policy.

Goal Setting

We will have set goals for the season, both individual and team goals, that are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and with a Time constraint).

Player goals that centre on improvement relative to certain aspects of their game,

Team goals that focus on each game or block of fixtures, particularly the must win games or the number of targeted points we can accrue during any given period.

And seasonally, our major goal would obviously be to make the play offs.

Nutrition

Individual nutrition plans would have been pre-determined by appropriate staff and in doing so would most certainly have taken into consideration players' eating habits, alcohol intake and body fat readings.

That would then become a lifestyle issue and undoubtedly any eating strategy at the club, whether it is after training sessions or pre or post game, would reflect the club's recommended nutritional plan.

Indeed, on the weekly schedule, on three or four occasions the players will be provided lunch at the club prior to their afternoon session.

Hydration

Likewise with the hydration policy, player fluid intake runs in tandem with any eating plan.

All players need to be able to prepare and perform to optimum levels. The objective, just as with all other areas of preparation, is to bring your player to competition fully hydrated. The most common indicator being the colour of urine. In a normal person it should be clear. However, athletes ideally should arrive at competition with urine that is a mild straw colour.

Why? Well the medics tell us not to wash away our performance! Too much fluid intake can adversely affect our essential nutrient levels.

Example Weekly Plan

Moving on from the fixed policies that run throughout our preparation during the season, to focus on this week's preparation, which would most certainly have started the previous week.

Staff from the club would have attended one of our opponent's minor fixtures, the benefits being many fold, not least that we can have a look at and assess:

- Defensive and go forward shape
- Check on first graders recovering from injury
- Assess fringe players who may play against us
- Pick up significant audible information such as elements of team vocabulary that run throughout the club.

Another member of staff would then watch the first team game and prepare a verbal or written report of information and observations that also needs adding to the mix.



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Monday

So in terms of putting it all together and picking up on the weekly schedule, the first thing tabled is Physio and Rehab. That is fastened into the programme at the same time each day beginning Monday. This follows on from the post game pool session that consists of walking, jogging, continuous movement patterns for the upper body and gentle swimming.

After the game, there is often the temptation to do absolutely nothing, but that is not a good idea for it leads to the onset of muscle soreness so therefore plays no part in aiding the recovery process.

The second thing on the programme is cutting a video to facilitate the review process. The actual clips to support this presentation would probably have been identified during Sunday evening, when given the chance to watch the game for a second time in a more relaxed manner at home.

Individual game involvement tapes for each of the players will also be prepared.

Having done that, it's into a weekly staff meeting where there are full discussions to take on board information, agree to the weekly programme and outline roles and responsibilities to facilitate the same.

Confirm with the medical staff player fitness and availability and further check with the conditioning staff fitness levels of any player coming back from injury and into contention for a place in the starting line up.

Finally, if possible, select the team.

Tuesday

Present the review, recognise and take on board what we, as a group, need to do, in order to put the game to bed and move on.

Another aspect of review would entail the players being given their personal involvement tapes to look at in preparation for the one to one interviews scheduled for the following day.

The first physical activity would then take place in the gym and the afternoon session would address core and positional specific unit work that is more than likely review based.

Wednesday

First thing in the morning, members of the coaching staff would conduct individual player reviews. This presents an ideal opportunity to discuss current performance, match current performance against individual player goals, refocus or agree other targets and equally importantly gather some feedback from the player on how they think it's going or indeed present an opportunity to discuss other issues.

The afternoon session would probably consist of agility and speed work, with an opportunity to practice some skills refinement, advancement or even aspects of tactical teamwork that may need revisiting.

Then return to the video suite to prepare a tape for the preview session.

In doing so, probably present something that highlights the opposition's shape, key tactics and current way of playing, whilst also looking in at individuals that present an opportunity to exploit them.

This is probably the most important coaching duty of the week. Not only will the evidence generated become our playing strategy, it will also shape the final two training sessions.

Thursday

This is free time for the players and a chance to relax before the final run in to the game.

Friday

In the morning we go straight into the preview meeting. This now is the business end of the week. The information imparted at this meeting really does shape the way the team is going to play.

The training session this morning will be based on the findings of the video cut. Indeed, one of the coaching staff will already be drilling our second grade to mimic the opposition's style of play.

For example, their hooker, a key player, regularly goes from dummy half but in doing so he always rolls off to his right.

Strategy: Left side ruck defence always aware.

And can we practice that this morning? Of course we can.

Their left-winger suffers from mad winger's disease. He leaves his wing open by jumping in to assist the centre in making tackles when quite clearly the centre has got the job covered.

Strategy: We will push it wide and run at the space between centre and wing, draw him in and release our winger.

Can we practice or mimic that situation? Of course we can.

The other winger struggles under the high ball. If he takes one, he'll catch them all day but if he misses one he goes to pieces.

Strategy: Bomb him early. Let's see what kind of a day it is and if it's a bad day let's keep it on.

All those situations will be manifested in this morning's session and will of course become a major part of the strategy for this week's game.

After lunch, a final gym session for the players whilst the Head Coach prepares additional information in the form of player tip sheets. These

are two or three key points on the opposition playing squad and a couple of key points for each of the players to take into the game.

Game Day

This information is distributed at the Saturday morning meeting prior to the final team run through.

Game day the team will meet around 1.45pm.

The Head Coach will spend around fifteen minutes to reinforce the strategies and tactics and to remind the players of various pointers agreed upon to utilise in this game.

Next, prepare the team sheet and permutate options to cover substitution and injury, brief and remind game day staff as to their various roles and indeed what any Plan B issues are.

With regard to the dressing room pre-game, a coach might opt to keep a low profile and allow the combatants to put the final touches to their own preparation. However, there would be the odd quiet word in someone's ear and maybe two or three key reminders as the players prepare to take the field.

Game on!

ENDS

Notes



12. An Approach to On Field Evaluation

The preparation for the game is over, last week's fixture has been reviewed and this week's opposition analysed and the game previewed.

The focus now shifts to evaluating the game and the action as it takes place. This a massive role in coaching terms. It leads to instant strategic decisions being made which may or may not have a positive influence on how certain individuals or the team adjust their performance or ultimately on the result.

Just as with every other coaching duty, it is important that we have clear objectives as to what we are trying to achieve and as a start point it begs a simple question:

What are we, or what do we want to evaluate?

- The system, strategy, game plan, call it what you like
- Our agreed priorities for this game
- Our objectives, offensively and defensively
- The goals we have agreed and set both individually and team focused
- And of course, the opposition.

Within all of that, I suppose that we can analyse almost anything that happens during the game.

It would also be interesting to note how we are carrying out the process of evaluation and who is likely to be involved in this process which includes:

- Observation
- Gathering of information and opinion from other staff

- Use of effective questioning
- Statistical analysis to measure and confirm judgements.

It may well be that those deployed in the evaluation of performance (whilst in progress), in one way or another, are many fold and could include some if not all of the following:

- Head coach
- Assistant
- Trainer
- Physio
- Captain
- Other players
- Statistician.

Allow me to pick up on the important role of one of those involved - the statistician. A quote attributed to Mark Twain and more recently Benjamin Disraeli is:

"Lies, damn lies and statistics."

The lists that you as a coach can create to gather data are endless:

- Ball control, both, you and the opposition
- Tackles made or missed
- Offloads conceded
- Errors
- Hit ups and passes
- Kicks in general play
- Scrums and penalties.

This is just a sample of a non-definitive list.

Personally, as a coach these days I am only interested in effective tackles made as a benchmark of our defensive effort, and when, where and how we turn over possession as our offensive benchmark.

However, should you examine statistical analysis a little more closely, then you have got to ask yourself whether or not statistical data always confirms or tells us exactly what we need to know.

A quote attributed to one of the games leading coaches:

“It is widely assumed that the team with the best completion rate wins the game. Completion statistics are quantity statistics not necessarily quality statistics.”

And he goes on to say that, “The quality of the completion is more important than whether or not you complete the set.”

In other words, What was the outcome?

So, is it not back to my original statement about how, when and where we turn over possession and how effectively are we tackling? Those where my concerns are both outcome based.

So to further evidence that, consider this:

Your team completes 18/20 sets in the first half. You would be happy with that as a statistic and as a measure of good ball control. Yet your team is 0-22 down at half time!

Should you further examine what seems a great statistic when other data reveals that:

Only once during the half did they kick the ball into the opposition's red zone.

Five times they kicked from within their own 50m/40m area and eight times from deep backfield.

So the outcome is yes, they did complete ninety percent, but poor field position meant that the completion rate was ineffective.

What we have just identified is a quantity statistic that on the face of it seems positive, but in actual

fact has a negative outcome. Therefore, the evaluation that should be evidenced is why we were ineffective?

What was our go forward like to have no field position? Were we winning collisions? I would suggest not or otherwise we would be on the front foot and going forward.

How good were the kicks that we managed to get away (well I think we have just seen that) but equally importantly, how effective was the chase to support the kicks and the subsequent transitions?

Let's now examine another situation.

In one of your fixtures, a prop forward makes 20 hit ups, 40 tackles, with no errors and no missed tackles.

Looks like we are on a winner here! So do we give him the Tissot watch, the bottle of Bollinger?

But again, should you examine it more closely, how effective were his involvements?

Did he break the line? Offload the football? Win collisions? Was the outcome of his tackles that of dominance?

If they where not, don't give him the watch and the champagne.

So, it's not really as straight forward as it seems. If we are to make appropriate decisions based upon what we see, then realistically, those previously identified, who on game day contribute to the process should be tasked with gathering or distributing information that is relevant and outcome based.

Realistically you would be evaluating the major components of your play.

Offensively:

- Are we going forward, ruck plays, dummy half running?
- What lines are we running particularly over the advantage line?
- Is the support play effective and enthusiastic, taking bodies out of the tackle?
- Do we have good width/depth/shape?



13. An Approach to Review

Once the game is over then the cycle of:

- Preparation
- Play
- Evaluate and
- Play again begins.

It certainly begins with a thorough review of the team's most recent performance.

Review, quite simply, is post-game evaluation that entails a critical assessment of all aspects of past performance. It is a process that should offer constructive feedback to the players or the team in an effort to assist in the improvement of all future performances.

It doesn't matter whether you win or lose, play well or poorly, in order to instigate improvement you require feedback. It is quite literally 'the breakfast of champions'.

Why is it the breakfast of champions? Why is it so important to provide constructive feedback? Because it should provide:

- The facility for new learning
- An area within which further development needs to be focused.

Feedback can occur in a number of environments - on the training field, in the dressing rooms, post training or playing or within team or one to one meetings.

The better reviews are both descriptive and objective. They are based on facts or

happenings, player and team performance or behaviour. All reviews should promote awareness and responsibility of action whether good or bad, positive or negative.

Players should take a shared ownership of the review process and with it full responsibility for any agreed outcome of the review.

In order to do just that and provide the best reviews, you must ask questions that:

- Link performance to specific team, group and personal goals
- Focus on specific phases and occurrences in the match
- Generate facts rather than opinions.

Players require feedback to provide:

- An evaluation of their performance against previously set objectives
- A detailed description of what actually took place
- Evidence of progress (or the lack of it)
- Clarification of areas where performance is above, equal to or indeed below expectations.

As a conclusion to this process, there should be relevant documentation that is suitable and useable in recording and setting further goals.

Here is a simple example of a form that will facilitate just that:

Game:.....

Name:.....

What did I do well?.....

.....

What could I have done better?.....

.....

How do I improve?.....

.....

Goals for next game:.....

.....

Review is not just about the one game. It is about the whole process, the environment, the bigger picture:

- Training
- Conditioning
- Mental preparation
- Nutrition
- Rest and recovery strategies
- Club Personnel
- Support Staff
- Self.

Review is not just a once in a while thing. Checkpoints need building into your programmes of work allowing ongoing assessment day to day, weekly, monthly, mid-season, end of season, pre-season. To continually improve, evaluations are a necessity.

The major role of the coach involved in the review process is to generate feedback to such a high level, that it provides positive impetus for the player or team involved to improve, move forward and achieve even more. **ENDS**

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14. An Approach to Developing a Quality Environment

So you are head coach at a Super League club and it's day one. What are you going to do to create an environment that is conducive to producing winning performances?

Coaching is about delivering a service to your athletes, your players and the team.

However, in order to deliver a quality service and create a performance environment you have first got to know and fully understand what your starting point is.

Coaching at this level is a 'we' thing. You cannot create or deliver the right environment in which to consistently produce winning football on your own.

At the outset, you need to also carefully consider the people you put in place, the make up of your coaching staff. What is it that makes them tick?

Having put them in place, are they really capable of doing a job for you because performance teams cannot afford to carry any passengers? You need to know what their strengths are and where they pull up short.

Whatever role you've given them, every member of your staff must be clearly accountable for their piece of the action. If you are to be successful, they must add value and if they don't, then they shouldn't be there.

In order to create a performance environment that is positive and distraction free you need also to consider every situation as it arises and provide

solutions that best manage both your staff and your players.

What you are actually trying to create is 'One Team, One Spirit, One Vision'.

Should you do that, then it is at this point that you can start to consider what is it that makes a winning culture.

Experience shows that it starts with you and your staff and the environment we have just spoken about.

It is about your philosophy as to how the game should be played and your shared vision.

Remember one team, one spirit, and one vision. These are the non-negotiable principles about how you operate. Having shared goals and ambition, desire and determination and positive actions are the attributes and qualities that contribute to winning.

On the other hand, what is it that destroys winning?

Compromising your values leads to inconsistent practice and your players will pick up on that immediately. Implementing quick-fix solutions does not solve problems and consist of negative rather than positive actions.

Now those two words, positive and negative, need to be considered further.

If you are to be successful throughout your coaching career, it will almost certainly be because you have created a working environment that is positive for everyone involved.

It's a must. If you set the right tone, then it will run throughout the club.

Staying positive every day and in every situation is no easy thing to do. Some days we are dealt a bad hand, but your job is not to let it affect your workplace. However bad the hand, you must engineer and manipulate every situation into a positive because failure as well as success is a reality in sport.

Remember that! Because when the flag drops in any race, the bullshit stops!

You either win or lose. It's an occupational hazard!

If you've lost, then you have two choices. You can beat yourself up, deflect and apportion blame or you can stay positive. You can start to motivate those around you, inject some positive energy into the situation and encourage your staff and your players. You can make some positive statements, take on board some collective

responsibility and together problem solve and look for solutions and ways to improve, regroup and go again.

That for me is how you start to build your environment and deliver a quality service.

However, having said all that, then there's something you need to consider when you are just starting out to coach.

If you take nothing else on board, then please note this piece of information. Over time, the successful coaches are the ones who have the ability to adapt as necessary and it's probably their core principles and philosophy that will help lead them there and in doing so assist them effecting any change.

Wayne Bennett is not the same coach that he was 18 years ago – but he is the same man.

Alex Ferguson is not the same manager that he was 20 years ago – but I'll bet you he is the same man.

The common factors are principles, values, philosophy, knowing yourself and your capability and knowing where you want to go, and in the final analysis, how you are going to get there.

ENDS



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15. An Approach to the Role of Camp Head Coach

We have had a chapter on how to approach the short term coaching environment, paying particular reference to the preparation for a one off fixture and then moving forward to identify our preparation from a Head Coach's perspective.

Here, I want to remain in the short term coaching environment and examine many of the similarities and subtleties required to operate efficiently on the various player development camps.

From a purely player development point of view, the player development camps, broadly speaking, are a means of:

- Assisting players to achieve and fulfil their potential
- Identifying and progressing players to the next level
- Creating a quality environment and a quality experience in which players do realise their potential and if ranking permits move forward to the next level.

Actually, the player development camp is more than that. It's not just about players. It represents a major opportunity to develop yourself in your role as Head Coach – a role that includes responsibility for:

- The overall management of the coaching environment
- The planning and delivery of the programme
- The inclusion, utilisation and mentoring of your immediate staff

- The continuous evaluation and refinement of the work being done
- Preparation for competition
- Coordination of interaction with all other camp personnel
- Staff, player and self-evaluation

By way of an example, your responsibilities are not just for your immediate coaching staff and the group of players in your charge. You actually have a duty to develop a working environment and a work ethic that caters for all interactions involving a staffing list that may well include and involve:

- Head Coach
- Assistants
- Players
- Team Managers
- Physiotherapist
- Welfare Officer
- Coach Educator

That being the case, then from a Head Coach's perspective, the major objective that would assist in facilitating the above rests in your ability to be:

- Performance Analyst
- Camp Director

This represents a vastly different situation compared to how you operate as Head Coach at club level, and the creation of that quality experience I spoke about is very much dependent on how you coordinate and interact with this identified group of people.

This also presents a great opportunity to impose your work ethic and personality into creating a best practice setting. It would also be a smart move, in my opinion, to do your homework and prepare yourself by exploring the likely interactions and areas of communication that need to be established.

- How do the other members of staff fit in?
- What are they responsible for?

Let us then examine the roles of the ancillary staff.

Coach Educator - is on camp to evaluate the coaching process. They will offer assistance on the programme should you require it, and they are in effect a sounding board, another point of view, and are there to support and offer you and your immediate staff appropriate and constructive feedback.

Performance Analysts - are responsible for player assessment throughout the camp, talent identification, player ranking and recommendation for selection.

They are, in most cases, experienced coaches who have trained to assess players, against set criteria and in every conceivable situation.

Physiotherapist - is an important part of your welfare team, whose major responsibilities include general treatment and care, rehab and prehab.

Your physio is actually more than that. If used correctly, (apart from the obvious) they can become your eyes and ears, as players will confide in them, where they may not confide in you. Your physio will most certainly have a feel for 'how it's going'.

Welfare Officers – have a huge responsibility. In many cases, where your day ends, theirs is just beginning.

All welfare officers will have undergone child protection training and are fully aware of the potential issues.

They too will have relevant information to contribute, particularly in the important areas of

player discipline and attitude. In fact, their opinion could be taken into consideration should you have a close call on your final selections.

Camp Director – is in effect the boss with overall responsibility for the smooth and efficient running of the camp. Should you need clarification on any issue, if there is something you are unsure of, or not comfortable with, then the Camp Director is there to resolve or give direction whatever your query.

Having taken into account the roles of the various ancillary staff, then consideration must now be given to the immediate coaching environment.

The role of the Team Manager is non-contentious, taking care of the logistics and general organisational duties that support the coaching and playing process.

However, your relationship with your Assistant Coaches should be carefully thought through and I suggest that you begin by exercising your powers of delegation.

Allocate areas of responsibility. This camp is also about their development as coaches and you (the Head Coach) are the key to facilitating this process.

This is an opportunity for you to adopt a mentoring role, and by mentoring, I do not mean solving every problem they encounter. That is not mentoring. Discussion and direction leading them to their own solutions is mentoring.

You most certainly need to establish and communicate a protocol - a modus operandi. To have an agreed way of working that throughout the duration of the camp allows your assistants to function and to coach, probably more than you do, but in doing so retains your status and a message to all involved that you are the one in charge.

For example, should you operate at the beginning of a session and again at the end, then that alone allows you first and last word. Your coaching team then becomes the filling for your sandwich and incidentally, while they are working you have an ideal opportunity to assess:

- How the staff operate
- The players in action
- The programme.

The retention of your status remains the same whenever there is a time out. Do not allow the players to get mixed messages. Do not let the players hear every point, explanation and instruction in triplicate.

If you are happy with the session, then allow the coach who is delivering to impart the information whilst you and the other members of staff take up a position within the group.

However, if for whatever reason you are not happy and feel that you need to address the group, step out to the front. By doing so that should be the cue for your delivering coach to 'give way' and integrate into the general group, thus allowing you to make your point.

These things do not just happen. In order to affect some of what I have just outlined then a pre camp meeting must take place to:

- Agree best working practice
- Set out areas of responsibility
- Programme plan.

The key to successfully coordinating the camp now rests on how well you communicate.

For instance, meetings:

- When?
- Who with?
- What for?

When? Daily – certainly with your immediate staff.

Who with? Could be with any one of the personnel we previously identified who are active and in the coaching environment.

What for? Primarily to gather or impart information or plan or evaluate activity.

Examples of meeting content would include:

- Immediate staff - to plan the following day's activities, discuss and evaluate work done, or to coordinate or delegate responsibilities.

- Performance Analysts - to cross-reference the selection and ranking of players.
- Physiotherapist - to check on injuries, pre and rehab programmes.
- Welfare - for information on how the players behave in their down time. Are there any issues?
- Coach Educator - to discuss and evaluate coaching feedback.
- Team Manager - with regard to player coordination such as where and when you want them.
- Last, but certainly not least, the players themselves.

These meetings are extremely important and just like your skills sessions they also need dressing in different wrappers. Do not always address the group to impart information, or facilitate feedback in the same way. Vary it.

Finally, guidelines for planning and evaluation:

- The success of your coaching sessions is directly related to the planning that you do.
- Failing to plan is planning to fail.

Always set out clear objectives of what you hope to achieve in your sessions. Do not be guilty of trying to achieve too much or you will find that more often than not you achieve little.

Initial considerations to assist in the planning of your sessions would revolve around the logistics of:

- How much time you have
- What facilities are available
- How many participants are there
- What equipment is required.

Other things I would suggest you consider with regard to the delivery of the sessions are:

- Develop and relate your coaching activities to the competitive situation
- Be prepared to adapt
- Always emphasise quality
- Evaluate.

Whilst on the subject of evaluation, it is not just about the session, it is also about your own



16. An Approach to Team Management

It is widely accepted in the business world, that to function effectively in management and have the ability to control situations as they arise in the work place, requires four main skill sets:

- Cognitive
- Motivational
- Interpersonal
- Presentational.

I don't think it's any different in sport. Each of the identified skills is developed over time. Each one is a personal skill and when put together would, I am sure, reflect your own individual approach to management and culminate in exuding your own unique personality and style.

In exploring each of these skills then, what exactly do we mean by cognitive and where does that fit in?

Cognitive simply means thought process.

It's about developing the ability to think things through on the one hand and see things coming on the other. We are talking instincts, anticipation and awareness of situations. In some cases it involves second-guessing before things actually happen.

This in turn allows you to operate in a pro-active manner, rather than being reactive all the time.

Undoubtedly, young managers do not bring this bottle to the party immediately. It is about experience and having a sound and reliable knowledge base to call on.

Motivational skills sees managers as leaders, target setters, who are able to achieve their goals. They are self-motivated, able to motivate and inspirational to others.

Interpersonal skills see managers first and foremost as team players. They should be able to plan in great detail and work with colleagues to create an environment of mutual respect and trust.

Presentational skills then follow, as high performing managers are able to present their decisions professionally using a variety of methods. They undoubtedly spend the majority of their time communicating with others. As a result, and by demonstrating a professional approach to all areas and in all involvements, are perceived by others to be articulate.

Because the reality is, that effective management requires high levels of leadership, knowledge and confidence.

So let us begin to explore some of the basic roles and functions that make up the role of effective team manager and a good start point would be defining what team management is.

In my opinion, it is dealing with all off the field issues and with it a shared responsibility for the team.

The personal qualities that are required to fulfil this role are many fold. They include qualities such as professionalism in all you do, displaying high levels of honesty and integrity, confidence

in manner, ability to delegate, approachable, flexible, good communication skills, good work ethic, sound business skills and accountability.

Quite clearly, managers are at the forefront of the people business and as we have already identified, need to be team players, highly motivated, lead by example and in doing so set and demand the highest of standards.

All leadership qualities can be evidenced because:

1. You can see the people, who lead by example.
2. You know who the team players in your environment are.
3. You can recognise people with high levels of motivation.
4. People soon become very much aware of those who constantly set and demand the very highest of standards.

We are, of course, talking Visible Management.

However, there are many steps to take before operating at this level. There are relationships to build and I would suggest strategies that need to be employed in doing so.

Being approachable, socialising, relaxing, getting to know the players and staff and allowing them to get to know you would go some way to removing any perceived or potential barriers. The 'them and us, players versus management or staff' syndrome.

You will have gone some way towards creating an environment and relationships within it based on mutual respect and trust (sound familiar – short-term representative coaching).

Having said that, then the other side of that coin and another vital piece of your communication and relationship building strategy should take into account the times when things don't go as planned. The times when you are required to deal with people or situations that require an element of trouble shooting and conflict resolution skills.

These situations need to be prepared for carefully. Problems need to be identified, all aspects handled with care and understanding,

information gathered from all involved and assessed in an effort to arrive at a resolution.

In doing so, don't be afraid to make decisions and if unsure, don't be afraid to seek advice. No body knows it all and if you are unsure advice is usually free.

At the end of the day, a decision that can be justified is what you need to arrive at.

Your ability to operate in these situations and get a result is very much dependent and linked to the respect and trust that you have built previously.

Probably the most important relationship is that between manager and coach.

Neither, in my opinion, should assume the role of boss. The reality is there is no boss. It is a sharing of responsibilities. Each should be fully aware of the other's role, where that role begins, the cross over points and where it ends.

More importantly, in the interests of creating a positive environment, they should be mutually supportive of each other. Therefore, it is important at the outset that the manager and coach meet to define, agree and establish some of the major areas of consideration and clear areas of responsibility:

- Who does what?
- Team and club goals and objectives
- Football issues and logistics
- Disciplinary issues/codes of conduct.

Having then developed a mutual philosophy by which you feel the club, team and staff should operate, it is important to compile and introduce a set of operational guidelines – a code of conduct that sets agreed standards in key areas, details expectations and helps create a positive image.

In other words lays down the parameters of what is acceptable and what is not.

In creating such guidelines, it is important that codes of good practice should be negotiated and not imposed. It is about ownership, and anyone who the code affects should be involved in the creation of it. Also, when created, it should be published and circulated to all concerned.

Obviously, the compilation of any such document would be subject to, and need to reflect the level of player, team, competition or environment in which you are operating or functioning.

You should also be prepared to exercise a degree of flexibility in the interpretation of the document (not everything is black and white). It should also be presented in such a way that all involved don't view it as a stick to beat them over the head with, rather a set of guidelines that will help and contribute to developing a best practice environment.

Channels and methods of communication we have identified to be one of the key qualities required to effectively manage.

Indeed, by the very nature of management, we also identified that you spend the majority of your time communicating with others and that a pre-requisite in management was having the ability to present your decisions professionally and in a variety of ways.

Therefore, it would be remiss not to explore some of these methods of communication and in doing so pay particular reference to the number of reports you may have to produce in that role.

Reports usually serve only two purposes and they are to document and record events and recommend or instigate change.

Thus any report that you prepare should be:

- Structured to include start points, key points, aims or solutions
- They also need to be accurate and concise, representing clearly, any views whilst also presenting issues for discussion
- Finally, they should be purposeful leading to outcome, recommendation or conclusion.

In terms of communication, how are you going to deal with the media? Quite frequently you will be interviewed or asked to comment.

This is another area that requires preparation, and can I suggest that your agreed code of good practice comes into play immediately. By that, I mean remember whom you are representing.

With regard to the interview, prepare for this important piece of communication carefully. Think on what the likely topics or issues will be.

Consider your responses to the potential questions posed and wherever possible be precise and get to the point.

Finally, if in the interview you are asked to comment on the opposition, then being respectful and courteous are two obvious qualities that come to mind. **ENDS**

Notes



17. An Approach to Leadership in Coaching

Leadership or leaders, in the context of coaching, are those who have the ability to gain consensus, command respect and, in doing so, influence others in order to achieve the team's agreed and stated goals.

In Rugby League and in sport in general, success in this area is usually measured by goals achieved.

The ultimate measurement is in terms of results, but the result can only be obtained by the achievement of a number of other process goals that have been set in other areas. For example:

Individual player goals in skills acquisition, conditioning related goals or team goals relative to adhering to certain principles of play or discipline.

The whole, in terms of the result, is quite simply the sum of the parts and almost always it is effective leadership that is essential to any success.

There are a number of outside factors that must be present and accepted by your employers and those working in the club environment or the coach's ability to lead is a non-starter.

One of these is the power of authority that is equal to the responsibility of the position. In other words the coach is allowed to do the job.

Being acknowledged as an effective leader by those that you (the coach) intend to influence, takes us back to our start point and your ability to gain consensus, command respect and ultimately influence those you are working with.

Effective Leadership in Coaching

Leadership, in my opinion, occurs and can be evidenced when the coach is clearly up to the task, displays the ability to teach and coach (for teaching and coaching is leading) and has gained respect and is aware of his own strengths and weaknesses.

Secondly, through the team when the players have the necessary ability because their levels in all areas have improved and they have learned.

Thirdly, when the players have made the necessary commitment because they have been empowered and believe in what they are doing.

Finally, when the necessary atmosphere and environment has been created, the players have bought in and there is an obvious interaction (dynamic) that exists between the coach and the players. In other words, an environment of mutual trust has been created and the players and the coach now share common goals.

Leadership and Coaching Characteristics

The principal characteristics of good coaches and or leaders would include a love of the game, a love of coaching the game and a love of being a winner in all areas.

Player improvement, improving team performance, installing systems and structures and setting standards in all areas that are outcome focused and where measurable becomes the norm.

Other traits would include self esteem and self belief and in terms of the players they are working with, the ability to build and raise their self esteem almost to the point of arrogance where they believe solidly in their ability in any given situation.

Also needed is the ability to successfully manage and develop people. There's no escaping it. Coaching and leaders work and ply their trade in the people business.

Add the following:

- The ability to command respect, and respect is a two-way thing. You can't demand it. You must earn it!
- Communication is the major coaching tool. If you can't communicate, you can't coach. All too often it becomes a case of; it's not what you say, it's the way that you say it and indeed how that is interpreted.
- Persistence and a capacity for hard work that in turn develop and encourage a work ethic.
- Knowledge of themselves, the players, the game, skills and tactics.
- Integrity to set standards and remain consistent.
- Intelligence, particularly emotional intelligence and thus able to recognise symptoms and situations and in doing so apply a range of responses including empathy and appropriate solutions.
- Having the ability to plan and organise.
- In terms of being able to deal with the now, by drawing on and using experiences from the past, whilst also planning for the future.

That is the level of the detail of planning that needs to take place.

And it is also a fair bet that you could not or would not survive, coach or lead anyone without a degree of mental toughness because it is a fact of life that failure as well as success is a reality

in sport. Just like in any other walk of life, there are highs and lows and renewed challenges and the leader must keep the environment positive and set goals to meet the new challenges.

So if those are some of the skills, traits and characteristics of a leader, what then should be the expectations of a good leader?

In terms of the leaders themselves, they should remain positive throughout and always expect that the end result will be a successful one. Also, that everyone in the organisation will, to the best of their ability, put in the required effort at all times, embrace, adopt and comply with any agreed codes and in doing so do not just meet the standard but raise the bar.

On the other side of this equation, players and staff should expect that the coach displays the identified personal characteristics and doesn't ask others to do more than he is prepared to do himself.

The Road to Leadership

Not everyone is a born leader. Some of the traits and characteristics can only be developed through experience and over time. The start point is actually knowing where the start point is and accurately being able to assess the initial level of competency of yourself, the players, the team and the club you are involved with.

However, in order to develop and progress you need to know where you want to go and have a clear picture of how to get there. You also need to regularly assess and evaluate all the steps along the way and be prepared to refine and adjust your strategies to meet each situation.

The Coach in the Role of Manager

The equation I used previously was that coaching and teaching = leading.

I actually think that the role of Head Coach or should I say successful Head Coach, has evolved over time and that the traditional role of coach requires three skill sets.

Leadership, management and coaching - and probably in that order.

Notes

We have explored leadership, but in terms of management there are a number of key tasks. Amongst them are the interactions (communications) that you have with the players and immediate and ancillary staff. There are your deeds or personal effort, which is visible management or 'walking the talk' and there are the everyday situations, good and bad.

To be able to be effective and manage all situations is very much dependent on the policies, rules and standards you have brokered and implemented over time. They will give direction and help you arrive at and make decisions or manage the processes.

Finally, can it all go wrong and where can it all fall down?

It can if there is an inability to:

- Gain respect
- Communicate
- Organise
- Manage effectively or teach efficiently
- Have a work ethic
- Gain sufficient knowledge
- Analyse and read the signs
- Plan
- Persist (won't or can't dig deep)
- Create the right environment
- Work in harmony with others
- Eliminate negatives

Any of the above will create a situation that is conducive to poor team morale and ultimately lack of success. This in turn will manifest in results. **ENDS**

