

A brief history of coaching rugby union

Traditional Approach

Coaching in this country has long been concerned with order and rigidity and drills (considered here as technical practices), whereby coaches impose the need to autocratically control their practice environments, feel that they must be an integral part of the process i.e., involved heavily and prescribe a certain set of answers.

The traditional coaching process:



The traditional coaching style:

Coach takes control. General learning. Emphasis on winning. Focus on performance. Coach makes all the decisions. Authoritarian leadership. Hands on style. Coach tells and shows. Coach acts as an instructor.

That this has continued within the community game and much higher, it may be added, long after the inception of Game Sense coaching is a matter of history and one of British culture. It is interesting to note in a seminar by Brian Ashton on Coaching through Games that in 1975 when he was playing at AS Montferrand he was informed that "we (the Montferrand coaching staff) do not coach like Englishmen". It seems that the French were foraying into and experimenting with a diametrically opposed mindset to coaching than what we were practising. As a result French players dared to be creative, had coruscating vision and were unafraid of the possibility of mistakes.

The major protagonist of this movement was Pierre Villepreux (who incidentally worked alongside Ashton intermittently from 1978-1995 in Italy, at Toulouse and at Bath) and who observed that modified games can be used to develop the understanding of players whilst the coach observes the players.

This methodology would be based in a single premise that the rules or conditions of the game would dictate the outcome or response from the players.

This is high order coaching and that skilled feedback or questioning from the coach can; develop an understanding of when and why players perform a task and improve their technical acumen during that task. It is of course demonstrated by theory. Hadfield and Kidman (2005) suggested that there are four learning stages which the players must pass through with the assistance of a coach who makes subtle adjustments to the coaching environment to continue this development process.

The learning process model:



This was further brought to the game's wider attention in England by current All Blacks coach Wayne Smith during his tenure at Northampton Saints (2001-2004). In his presentation on Continuity and in particular the area surrounding "winning the collision", he alluded to the fact that his players (Northampton Saints) must have an understanding that if a stepping ball carrier drives into space between defenders, then the immediate supporting player must cycle through a list of options that is required of him by that ball carrier. He argued that this is not a technical issue but an understanding issue, based on what the supporting player sees and that a player can only cycle through that list of options if they are immersed into real time, game based situations with limited or expanded conditions and opposition.

Game Sense Approach

The game sense process:

Game → Questioning → Game → Technical Practice → Game
(if necessary)

Game Sense (player centred) coaching style:

Players in control. Individualised learning (differentiated where applicable). Emphasis on development. Focus on the person. Players lead the decision making process. Democratic leadership. Hands-off style. Coach asks and listens. Coach acts as a mentor.

This coaching type is cyclical revolving around the game and the conditions that are posed on the players. As the players become more competent at executing the desired skill they will move through the stages of Hadfield and Kidman's' learning process model until they acquire the skill. It is at this point that the coach should alter the question that the players have to solve and in so the cycle toward competency begins again. If competency cannot be achieved through questioning then technical practices are held to perform part of a desired skill (technique) in a smaller coaching landscape before returning to the game to observe changes to player behaviour.

Why adopt a Game Sense Approach?

As stated it has a demonstrable effect on taking players through a learning process. This is the fundamental difference between the traditional approach and the game sense approach. Game sense promotes long term learning and retention of skills whereas the traditional methodology improves short term performance only.

Games are also inherently fun and can be used to generate engagement and motivation. It is player centred, relying on solutions created by the players, which therefore places them in a position of responsibility for their own learning. This leads to varied leadership qualities being extruded by the players as a corollary.

Go Coach

Use the games for understanding documents in the Coach's Pack, use the technical practices (SoR curriculum) where necessary but not in isolation from a game and challenge the behaviour of the players and yourself. Do not be afraid to cede control to the players as ultimately it is they who play and not the coach.