

in this issue

1. Current Trends in Coaching (part 3)

editor's comments

Dear All,

With the tournament almost at an end I will save my comments to the next newsletter so I don't, prematurely, put my foot in my mouth but just one comment about each union in the region, bear in mind I am writing this on 5th October on the TGV to Paris, so it is before the quarter finals:

- New Zealand – Is the best yet to come?
- Australia – Can the new #10 provide the consistency of Larkham? Four years with a limited front row isn't bad. Can the relative success continue?
- Fiji – Pressure will not always result in mistakes and points. Given the personnel, is a flat backline the best formation? Is it best to let the attack run at you?
- Tonga – Success borne of unity, especially forward unity, from which the backs had time and space to execute an attack within their skill set. Is this the product of a happier team?
- Samoa – Let's solve the set piece problem and penetration by putting a player into space?

Yours in Rugby,
Lee Smith

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Date	Union	Activity	Trainers/Attendees
1-11 NOV	PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia & Wallis and Futuna	Oceania Cup Western Division New Caledonia	RDM and IRB Trainers for New Caledonia.
6 NOV	NZRU & IRB	Level 4 Review 2007 and Preview 2008	RDM
10-11 NOV	Crusaders	Crusaders Level 3	RDM and selected coaches from Tier 2 unions.
16-18 NOV	Blues	Blues Level 3	RDM and selected coaches from Tier 2 unions.
19-24 NOV	FORU	IRB Educators Course at the Millenium Institute.	General Manager, RDM, IRB Licensed trainers and salaried development staff from unions.
25-28 NOV	FORU	FORU Planning Workshop at the Millenium Institute.	General Manager, RDM, Consultants, union CEO's and HP Managers and salaried development staff
29 NOV - 5 DEC	Tonga	Union Visit to continue level 2 Coaching and Refereeing.-	IRB Trainers
	Tahiti	Coaching Visit – National Team Preparation for game Vs Niue	IRB Coach Trainer
December	Tier 2 Unions	Review of Unions HP Programmes	General Manager, RDM, Consultant.

Current Trends in Coaching (part 3)

To Date

To re-iterate there is little need to re-invent the wheel for most aspects of the game. While those performing at the cutting edge are always seeking the marginal gain on their elite treadmill, at most levels of the game the content, method and delivery remains based on what has gone before. Even much of the detail falls into the category of “what goes around comes around” if you have been round long enough to be at both ends of the cycle. The danger is the new broom who thinks that the world started with its arrival as a matter of egocentric importance.

So there is little point in regarding new as better, or even that more is better when, by using what we have will do, so long as that great quality of discrimination makes the coach judicious in selecting for the needs of the players.

The crux of the matter is in making sure the information is drip fed to the players at an appropriate rate and at an appropriate time in their development. This may be when the demand occurs but this reactive approach maybe the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff and there is an alternative approach, the proactive one, which places a fence at the top. This proactive approach is better but more difficult. It is more difficult because it is necessary to anticipate player needs but not so difficult in that they are being met in their macro form by progressive coaching structures and player pathways.

There is little point in searching for a “miracle cure” when the tried and proven will enable players to progress at a rate based on their own pace of development avoiding blind alleys and their inherent waste. In meeting player needs it is at the micro level based on this substantial foundation of existing knowledge that the art of coaching needs to be practiced to meet player needs..

The egocentric coach who thinks he/she knows better, who has the one and only best way unique unto them is a substantial minority. These coaches are afraid of being challenged; they become introvert and seek control within their own narrow boundaries. The familiar scenario is the pre-teen and teenage coach who is able to dominate “his” team by share force of personality convincing the players that his way meets all their needs and conformity leads to victory. An inability to live with insecurity and risk, a common situation in coaching, frequently leads to problems if the coach decides to progress to older, more mature players. Once again the concept of a continuum from a situation in which the coach may dominate to one in which the players have the final say comes to mind.

The key is to consolidate what can be performed successfully while judiciously giving the players further options and opportunities to keep them interested and to expand their ever increasing menu of skills.

Current trends in coaching (continued)

Take the basic skills of passing and running, without which we have no attack, and tackling, without which we have no defence. If players are not proficient in these based on the amount of time and space available to them at their standard of play, there is little point in extending the menu of skills, the foundation is too insecure. This is equally so with body position and binding when scrumming and throwing, jumping and catching at the line-out.

What will vary is the pace with which the coaching progresses using the dimensions of time and space and the level of opposition. The variety in the session is in the activities used to coach the skill while the skills remain basically the same ensuring their reinforcement.

The final dimension is that of decision-making with a strategy or “move” generating options and the players developing the ability to read and perform the best option that has been created. This is the ability of the players to read what is in front of them.

As an aside, this has implication for team analysis as it is difficult to “read” the play of a team and work out tactics to defeat them, if the team is in fact reacting to your team. Note however, that few achieve this because just performing the skill is pressure enough.

We are, therefore, moving, however slow this may be, from the prescriptive, so that the less skilled, at least, have a context within which to play the game to self diagnosis and success. It is the role of the coach to provide the players with tools that enable them to do this even if, at times, the word “depth” seems not to be in the player’s dictionary.

It is in providing the tools of the trade that the coach serves the players best. These should be the same tools that the coach uses in analysis so that they are both “singing from the same song sheet.”

The helpful jargon that arises from team play and checklists of actions in sequential order both assist the player in this self diagnosis. The checklist need not be the prescribed one in the literature, however, these would not be there if they were not proven. All checklists should be sequential with their implied order of priority.

Checklists that are sequential and have an order of priority are:

1. Aims to Outcome Goals to Performance Goals to Achievement Strategies to Monitoring to Evaluation.
2. The Principles of Attack and Defence.
3. Key Factor Analysis for each of the skills
4. Functional Roles analysis for each of the roles.
5. Team Profile to Game Plan to Patterns of Play to Tactics.

These are the main ones.

As a consequence of empowering players with the tools we are ultimately moving to the “Just Do It” awareness situation.

Current trends in coaching (continued)

Some Realities of the Real World

Beyond this there is a range of strategies that are personal to the coach and which are essential if the coach is to sustain a substantial career.

1 Coping with Loneliness and Getting Honest Feedback

By far the most important is the need for the coach to keep his/her own counsel. The difficulty in doing this is born out of loneliness and the isolation of the position, the need to be able to treat a player as a "mate" after the game and a player up for selection based on the coach's view of their performance the next morning.

Isolation creates pressure and leads to coaches feeling the need to endear themselves to those nearest to them after the game only to find false promises cannot be delivered on.

This frequently leads to the coach confiding in senior players and, if there is an informal pecking order in the team, these players having much of the say. Aging players can become very dominant as their time comes to an end and these long-term friends of the coach can lead to compromise.

The recent practice of having a formal team of leaders does not fall into this category as it is formal, all know who the confidantes are and they also know that the group can change after a given period of time.

Increasingly successful teams are doing away with the traditional pecking order and a player's opinion is as good as the strength of their argument. This may extend beyond the players to new members of the management team who challenge what has always been the case just because they have happened in the past – inertia again.

The coach does need "confidantes", people who will challenge, who will give it to him/her straight and with sound opinion. These are not sycophants who just reinforce what the coach is currently thinking, worst of all to ensure they keep their job. It takes a person of considerable character to tolerate opposition and alternative views. The views must address the issue and not be personal, they must be soundly based and consistent with the brief given to the confidante and, even if the person would like the top job it must be clear that the only way to get it is to support, challenge in private and unify in public.

The range of people from which advice may be sought can be formal and informal with the former appointees always being more important than the latter group of mates. All should be given specific jobs on the day or for the duration and should keep to it especially in selection where the opinion given needs to be scrutinised very intensely.

So, we have mentors, not "yes" men; informants not sycophants and the coach must know the difference between the two.

Current trends in coaching (continued)

2. Dealing with the Media

In this regard we have the media whose needs the coach needs to fulfil, but whose opinions the coach need not be conscious of. The need to sell papers and TV and radio time are immaterial to the need to optimise team performance. The bottom line is if you want to read or listen to their views when things are going well then be prepared to do so when they are not. At best they may offer options; at worst they are a massive distraction whose priorities are different. For the written media especially it is the blame game pinning misfortune and success on players with infrequently any analysis of solutions or enhancements.

3. Ego

Given the isolation of the job, the drive of the individual or his/her "vaulting" ambition it is hard to see anyone becoming a high level coach without that person having a substantial ego. And yet to be successful that ego cannot be fed by personal achievements but by fulfilling the needs of others. Coaching is not an end in itself but a means to an end that being the performance of the team as reflected in the score.

As a result the coach must be able to see things from the point of view of others, wear their "hats" as a means of reflection on a decision that is about to be taken so as, not only to prepare to deliver the decision, but to also be prepared for the reaction, which, as a result, should not be unexpected.

There is nothing worse than dropping a player only to find the replacement inadequate, thus compounding a problem, similarly replacing a player, only to have the replacement get injured. Selection is not difficult compared to telling the player who has been dropped. Any player worth his/her position is not going to like it and should disagree, that is their privilege. It is also their privilege to be the first to know and to be told personally by the coach – the buck stops here. There is something strangely cleansing about doing this no matter what the apprehension beforehand.

4. Having a Common Purpose: Seeing the Big Picture

A people grouped for their common purpose into which they have had input generates both compatibility and synergy within the group. This commonality of purpose comes from the conductor of the orchestra being comfortable in a situation over which he/she doesn't have complete control that is willingly accepted. The coach will create unity by being open-minded, not to the extent that anything new is regarded as good, but to the extent that all views are tabled and all are up for equal scrutiny. It is in this way that brainstorming, without discrimination, becomes an essential technique.

Many a half baked opinion has a germ of importance that needs to be opened up before being shot down.

Current trends in coaching (continued)

The modern coach achieves fulfilment by meeting the needs of others by elevating the needs of others ahead of his/her own and by continually working on his/her own redundancy, in the knowledge that by doing so others will be meeting their ends.

In doing this space and time are created, allowing the coach to pull back and see the big picture, smell the roses, because, if the coach isn't doing it no one else will be as they focus on the specificity of their roles.

As uncomfortable as this might be the ability to maximise the abilities of the group as a whole is very self satisfying and self satisfaction is the only reward the coach should be looking for.

5. Avoiding the Closed Shop

To control the situation and make it predictable the tendency is to reduce the criteria by which something is judged to such a narrow range that it no longer serves the greater purpose of the enterprise. It also stifles lateral thinking and the likelihood of thinking outside the square, reducing the level of success.

Drawing in boundaries, by reducing the criteria, results in a loss of touch with reality. This controlled situation may induce loyalty, belonging, acceptance and efficiency but not initiative, common sense, imagination and intuition. To encompass all requires open-mindedness and self interest being achieved through facilitating the interests of others.

Finally, let's get real. Throughout the last 3 months the focus has been on making coaches aware of the variables the range of which is so great that "best practice" becomes a misnomer. While at a general level there are elements that could be called best practice at this level of detail that is so generalised, so non-specific as to be irrelevant.

6. The Transition from Knowledge to Performance

By far the most difficult aspect of coaching is the transition from knowledge to performance, to the reality of performance. Be this from presenter/facilitator to coach or from coach to player the transfer into practice is considerably less than what is being proposed. Often the reality and the intention is so far apart that it is difficult to fathom what has been going on.

The crux of the matter lies in the willingness, or lack of it, to apply what has been taught once the coach returns to his/her team and a further dilution of this by the players in their mode of play. Unless the person on the receiving end has been made to use the information, to trial it, and unless it is proven to be better and easier to do than what has been done in the past, they will revert to type.

This happens very often wasting time and resources. It happens especially to coaches who just attend without going the next step.

The number of committed volunteer coaches is diminishing. Talented potential coaches have better things to do and there is a multiplier effect when an unqualified, ex-international

Current trends in coaching (continued)

leapfrogs the rest as they endeavour to advance up the coaching pathway. Clubs and schools are only too happy to have someone do the job.

One wonders just how much of the games progress is stymied by coaches who stick to their old ways and resist other options, coaches who don't question.

At international level amongst Tier 1 and 2 unions winning is a matter of small margins in which the correct positioning of #9's foot has consequences along the attacking line. At levels below this there is a huge number of specifics the correction of which amounts to a quantum leap in performance. And this leap takes little effort just a willingness to be observant, question and to do something about it.

Too often the scenario is one in which the recipient is "hearing without listening: looking without seeing" to quote Simon and Garfunkel. All this does is reinforce old opinions. If someone is attending some form of coach education to reinforce existing opinions and criticise challenges to this conventional wisdom they may as well not attend. In order to make matters clear those conducting these activities must state that the intention is to threaten the comfort zone of the participants, to make them uncomfortable and to make them assess their coaching role and it's performance. Activities are conducted to create behavioural change.

Behaviour will not change if hearing and seeing are the learning processes but they will if applying, analysing, synthesising and (self and peer) evaluating are involved. We are now back at Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive skills.

To achieve this getting through the work in the prescribed time is counter productive. The quandary is, on the one hand, to cater for numbers so that those who fill the many positions that need to be filled have some knowledge, and on the other, moving as many as possible out of this group to those who qualify based on quality control.

The frustration inherent in this has to be tolerated as we try to move forward on both fronts while at the same time increasing the numbers in the second group. And, when this happens, we must be grateful for the improvement in coaching that makes all those players just a little better, more successful and with enhanced self esteem that enables them to enjoy the game.