IS COACHING REPRESENTATIVE TEAMS HARDER?

This paper will focus on skills that a representative coach needs in excess of the club coach to ensure success on the representative stage. However, like all coaching methods there will always be new or innovative ways to improve the status quo.

When appointed as the coach of a club team, you plan on having the players for 6 – 8 months and know you can build each week from pre-season through to hopefully the finals. When selected as a representative team coach, you have a limited time to conduct selection trials, pick a squad and then if lucky, play a couple of games in a short competition or tour. If the clubs / schools release the players, you have a limited time to conduct a selection process to decide on the best players for your squad. After short periods of training, you select your best 15, put them on the field with the aim of winning as many games as you can. So why can coaching a representative team be so difficult?

To explain some of the differences between coaching club sides and representative teams, we need to examine the requirements, expectations, player selections and how you develop a culture that combines a group of players that may compete against each other, to work together for a common goal.

HOW TO CONDUCT THE SELECTION PROCESS:

1. Setting player criteria

As a club coach you have pre-season games and then a home and away season to work out who the best 15 are in the club. As a representative coach with a limited timeframe to select you need to be more succinct with clearer goals and objectives. Before starting the trials, identifying what attributes you require from each position may assist selectors. Just selecting all the good players and then trying to put them into a team, may not always work. Additionally, when players ask for feedback on why they were not chosen, you have a list of criteria that you can provide honest answers against.

The difference between youth and open age representative teams, male and female participants, may also determine what skills, attributes and abilities you need the players to possess. With youth male and female sport, knowing whether you are selecting for future development (talent identification) or aiming to win (talent selection) can assist selectors.\(^1\)

There is definitely a “push pull” dynamic between the short-term interests of Win Now and the long-term health of any team or organization. If winning is the primary aim, you are looking at current athleticism, technical ability, and traits to help achieve short term success. You naturally select the biggest, strongest and fastest young athletes, and play them extensive minutes.2

On the other hand, talent identifiers are searching for young players who may not be elite athletes yet, but possess the physical and psychological attributes to eventually become one. Perhaps they have not yet grown, or been exposed to high level coaching. Perhaps they are not as skilful yet, but show a high level of coachability, sensitivity to training, and the motivation to learn.3

2. How to select the best players

Both club and representative coaches want the same outcome and that is to identify the best players available for their teams. Club coaches have the ability to use reserves from the grades below to make up their weekly squad, so are not limited with who they pick on a weekly basis. When selecting the squad for a representative team, the final number of players may be set by the competition rules or the overarching union. One problem you then have as a coach is, do you pick more than the number specified and have them as standby reserves or select the required number of players and if injuries / withdrawals happen reach out to non selected

3 Ibid
players. Both method work and if communicated up front to all players who trial for the team, may create a more harmonious situation if a players is required to be added to the squad later.

You also need to determine the type of player you want in your team. The All Black mantra of, “No dickheads”, selects on character as well as talent, meaning some of New Zealand’s most promising players may never pull on the black jersey. If you are unable to meet team standards off the field, you may struggle to meet the team standards expected on field. Do you select the most talented player, who may not meet the team culture expectations or is just cancerous to the playing group? This decision could be the deal breaker, particularly with organisational hierarchy. Ensure the characteristics of the players you want have been discussed with the boardroom prior to the trials to limit selection issues.

3. Identifying selectors

After identifying the selection criteria for the players and determining whether you are selecting a team to win or develop, the next issue is who do you pick to help select your team? Club coaches will usually select the team themselves with input from their assistant coaches. They have watched the players during pre-season and weekly games and have a smaller player basis to choose from. As a representative coach, your selection processes need to be seen as providing a fair and equitable opportunity for all players you trial.

To do this do you only have yourself and the assistant coaches or do you choose external coaches to provide a varied approach, or do you rely on club coaches to provide recommendations. All methods have positive and negative features and will depend on the age group of the team being selected and what you, the coach wants to achieve.

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Having external coaches assisting you may result in club / family friend bias. If there is any conflict of interest have that selector look at a different group, thereby removing any bias. Try to limit what position each selector is assessing, ie: Front Row, Back row, halves. If you are able to exclude yourself from selecting it may allow you time to discuss possible players with each selector.

ESTABLISHING A WINNING TEAM CULTURE

Club and representative coaches want to establish a wining team with a positive culture. How do you recognize a winning team with a positive team culture? The most recognizable factor in winning teams is “communication.” Having an extended period to work on and achieve a positive culture, club coaches can afford to experiment with what works and what needs improvement.

With a limited timeframe to build a positive team culture as a representative coach, having clear, concise goals and being able to communicate your requirements to your management team, player leaders and the players will assist with developing the squad holistically. The communication needs to go both ways with the players feeling as though they can address issues with the coaches and managers. When team leadership is clear about the purpose of the joined efforts of all its team members, and when every team member understands his or her own role in achieving the stated goals, then efficiency of effort is more likely to take place.

Good teams incorporate teamwork into their culture, creating the building blocks for success. By setting the parameters of team expectations both on and off the field the players are fully aware of how they must act and behave if they are to succeed as a team. When most teams are brought together the focus is on field, learning the game plan, running moves, doing unit work. Little attention is given to the players actually getting to know each other and forming a bond off the field. In club rugby players have a full season in which to know each others names, determine strength and weaknesses and get to know each other away from the field. Teams that have better cohesion off the field are more successful than teams that are solely focused on winning.

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5 Prichard, S, 2013, How to Take Your Team to the Top, Sourced from: http://www.skipprichard.com/taking-your-team-to-the-top/
6 Ibid
7 Jarvis, M. Sport Psychology 1999, p.70
Winning cultures emerge from understanding that a team’s number one asset is its players. Great teams cultivate and develop those assets to their fullest. Winning cultures thrive on the growth and advancement of their own.

Level of coaching freedom

When coaching a club team, all the old boys will tell you what you need to do to win. At the end of the day, they are all just words and you can make your own mind up of what to listen too. Coaching a representative team that is part of a larger organisation, may involve playing to set patterns, structures and naming conventions that you need to implement. Having to use someone else’s plays and moves can restrict a representative coach and if this causes issues, then early communications with the organisation needs to be undertaken, to determine whether you can have the freedom to vary from the game plan.

If you are presented with set structures, being able to communicate the requirements of the game plan to the players and why they are playing a certain way, will help alleviate any feeling from the players of not having a buy in.

OFF FIELD

When the team is in camp or on tour, you cannot train 24 hours a day. How the players interact off field may go a long way to building a strong bond between players and develop connections. With all representative teams, management will have an influence on activities based on what the coach requires.

Again communication is the key with planning off field activities. If guidelines are set and the players are given timeframes of when activities can happen, distances they can travel, recovery requirements and they are able to plan things for themselves, this gives them a buy in. Choosing players who comply with the team culture expectations will ensure a harmonious environment off the field. On longer tours, promotion of team activities is encouraged during the early stages, with more freedom provided to individuals once team culture has been established.

With management controlling the activities for open aged teams, this can lead to player frustration and perceived lack of trust. Allowing team leaders to control off field decisions.

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8 Martens, R. 2012, Successful Coaching Vol 4, P129
empowers the group and can lead to better decisions being made on the field\(^9\). Poor communication on why activities were chosen or why management have made a decision can lead to an, “us and them” situation, between players and management, resulting in a poor team environment.

Whichever method is used to determine off field activities, communication is the key and establishing a strong off field team environment assists with on field performances\(^{10}\).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted that being a representative coach, requires more planning, better communications and the ability to set up a strong team environment in a short timeframe. Unlike club coaches who have time throughout a season to trial and make changes, representative coaches need to achieve results almost immediately.

Setting clear and early goals and expectations and communicating this to the squad can assist with players, coaches and management all heading in the same direction. Getting the players to know each other off the field is just as important as their on field playing skills. This will assist with building a winning team culture and without the extended timeframes to achieve goals, determining what is important and focusing on these points may be the most successful.

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\(^{10}\) Martens, R. 2012, Successful Coaching Vol 4
References:


Jarvis, M. *Sport Psychology* 1999, p.70


