Community Rugby Coaches – Is their role Inspirational or Educational?

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Introduction – purpose of paper

It is recognised that one of the most formative periods in a player’s career is when they are 15 – 17 years old, when learning ability is at its highest and before the onset of potential bad habits. Armed with this knowledge, how do coaches achieve the best outcome from these players? Are players affected more by the inspirational nature of their coach or by the volume and quality of the rugby-specific education the coach provides?

This paper is based on community rugby coaching, with lessons learnt from South Australia, where despite the relatively low playing numbers, there are still a significant number of players that leave to pursue successful careers on professional rugby. Coupled with the competition presented by other dominant sports, such as a AFL, which has a very significative player base of in this age group, the quality of the coaching provided is paramount for player retention in Rugby. As such, the main purpose of this manuscript is to reflect on community coaching for the age group 15 – 17 years old.

Reflection

Do players get more as players from a coach who conveys a compelling case as how they should play, what they could do to improve, or do they enjoy the detailed technical approach to techniques. It is a fact that everyone has different learning styles, and that coaches have different coaching techniques and different ways of presenting their ideas. As such, it is highly important for coaches to know how can they use their coaching, communication and presenting techniques to maximise learning and performance of their athletes.

Australian community Rugby is blessed with large numbers of volunteer coaches, who by their own admission have largely taken up the roles of supporting their sons and daughters in playing. Their previous playing experiences range from retired elite players to those who have never played rugby (or even other sport), but all are typically avid followers of the game. Nonetheless, depending on many circumstances, at times they are all able to achieve the same results as coaches.

These factors highlight the importance of the player/coach relationship, which can have a direct impact on learning and performing outcomes of players.

Tests were conducted in USA with a group of 300 youths and 18 coaches, where 8 coaches were trained and followed clear direction in terms of player supportiveness and instructional effectiveness (1). The remaining 10 performed as a no-treatment control
group. When the programme was reviewed the trained coaches were evaluated more positively by their players, stating that they have had more fun and their teams exhibited a higher level of attraction amongst players. This was despite there being little variance between teams in what regards to won-lost records. However, it was observed that players with low self-esteem levels within the trained-coaches groups showed an increase in such levels. This process did not occur in the control group, where the low self-esteem players did not improve those levels.

One of the many problems in community coaching is the lack of contact hours between coaches and players. This is reflected in little time to deal with rugby-specific skills and team development. But it is also manifested in coaches having to make decisions on player treatment, such as low self esteem for example, without necessarily having enough information and knowledge on players’ personal background, or the relevant training in how to deal with it.

Goals and roles of community coaches

The main responsibilities of community coaches can be stated as: (i) create a positive environment with positive peer relationships; and, (ii) create a fun environment. It should be noted that despite the importance of these two factors, coaches’ roles are more complex than what they apparently suggest. For example, in the age group under review in this paper, players are likely to carry out peer comparisons to determine their ability as players, rather than relying solely on coaches’ or parents’ feedback, as is more prevalent amongst younger players, which can either reinforce or destroy their motivation to keep playing Rugby (2).

A crucial question is therefore how can the coach promote and encourage these two critical factors. The answer is firstly just by simply modelling the behaviours they expect from the players, to be positive in behaviour and characteristics. Players will mimic what they see.

As discussed earlier, youth coaches face the disadvantage of spending little contact hours with players, which in turn may result in lack of awareness of issues that may be going on outside the sporting arena, yet influencing the learning and performing ability of players. This challenge can be overcome by coaches creating sessions in which there is no space for conflicts, and where there is an element of fun. By carrying out such sessions, coaches are creating a positive environment where the success of development is greatly increased. Without the fear of conflict the athletes feel more relaxed and capable of greater knowledge and skill development and retention.

Possible techniques for this include enhancing peer relationships by: (i) all players being encouraged to be with their existing friends, but also to forge new friendships amongst team mates; (ii) encourage positive peer reinforcement, for example through positive
comments to team mates, high-fives after training drills, etc; (iii) discourage negative comments and teasing; and, (iv) emphasising group goals, team work and team cohesion.

Team cohesion refers to the forces within a team that act on its individual members, helping them feel part of the team and remain loyal to it. If a team is cohesive, its members get along well, support one another, communicate and cooperate well, and feel responsibility not only for themselves, but for all members of the team. In order to achieve it the following strategies can be employed: (i) create an environment where everyone feels comfortable to communicate, allowing for expressions of ideas, feelings and thoughts; (ii) explain the importance of individual roles on a team’s performance, outline their roles and stress the importance of them functioning as a whole to achieve team success; (iii) develop pride amongst team mates with similar roles, as athletes at all levels need support from their team mates (e.g. front row, half backs, etc); (iv) self challenging team specific goals, which will help the team to remain focused; (v) develop team identity – letting players developing the identity that sets them apart from other teams; (vi) avoid cliques – despite friendships within team mates are positive, the formation of cliques is a risk associated to those friendships, which can undermine team cohesion by creating segregation, culture of blame and disputes – this can be easily prevented by an aware coach by varying partners at appropriated times during training sessions (e.g. warm up, cool down, etc).

Discussion

From the previously exposed, it is evident that the role of the youth coach is vital and often reaches beyond the bounds of a pure sports coach. They do not only need to be educated on the technical aspects of the game but also in the humanistic and behavioural elements of coaching. The element of being inspirational adds vibrancy to the coaching experience.

Too often coaches are solely measured on a purely statistical basis of a won-lost record, when at times much of this can be out of their control. For example, a coach with good player stock may achieve good results and therefore being perceived as a great coach. At the same time, a coach with poor stock is unable to achieve such results and therefore perceived as poor performer, although he may well be a better technical and inspirational coach.

In Summary, a good coach needs to be both educational and inspirational. Coaching success should not always be measured by the win-loss ratio. Coaching-success measurement could be more subtle and taking into account aspects such as player development, player retention and even measured satisfaction levels of both players and parents of the programs delivery. By displaying the following traits a community coach will go a long way to achieve success.

- Get the athletes to believe on themselves – good coaches inspire their players to achieve more than they think they can.
- Do not use embarrassment or humiliation as a coaching tool. There is nothing educational or constructive about it.
- Become great life teachers, going beyond the teaching of rugby-specific skills only, by looking for opportunities where important life lessons can be learnt by players, e.g. recovering from injury, rebounding from defeat, living an healthy lifestyle, honesty, sportsmanship and integrity.
- Keep the game in perspective, try not to make one game any more important than other. Understand that youth sport is a vehicle in which to learn many vital life lessons.
- Do not let your own ego get tied up in game’s outcome. Coaching should be about the team, and coaches should not perceive their own worth on the outcome of a game. Commonly coaches have lives outside of Rugby, which have more bearing on their personality.
- Understand the differences between their athletes (e.g. personalities, learning abilities, learning styles, personal background, etc). Coaches should get to know their athletes as time permits and address them in a style that suits to maximise coaching effectiveness.
- Coach the person, not just the athlete. This may be difficult with minimal contact hours, but by making that extra effort to engage with the players in interests off of the field it demonstrates care and can often lead to increased performance.
- Be a great communicator. Understand that effective communication is a two-way process, where information is to be both received and transmitted. It is important to listen when players speak, and it is crucial that players perceive their coach as a good listener.
- Educate and listen to parents. Parents support is very important for the success of youth coaches. Obtaining their support requires time and effort, but it must be seen as an investment to achieve success, both on and off the field, both for individual players and for the team as a whole. Parents properly engaged by coaches in the coaching process will help them when needed, and will add many one percents to team and players development. A coach must clearly demonstrate which behaviours are appropriate and unappropriated. A coach must have open and functional communication channels with parents, and must obviously be open to honest feedback.
- Walk the talk with both athletes and parents. A coaches’ more powerful tool is modelling – be on time, be prepared, to act and look the part.
- Keep the coaching environment safe. Deal immediately with conflict and bullying. An atmosphere of safety is crucial for optimal learning and team performance.
- Continually challenge athletes to do better. Set a standard where average effort/performance is not acceptable. Get comfortable being uncomfortable, get used to effortless effort.
- Continually challenge yourself as a coach. Follow Continued Professional Development courses when available, get involved in coaching different sports, get involved in refereeing – get out of the comfort zone to expand coaching horizons.
- Be passionate about coaching rugby. Passion is infectious, motivational and inspirational.
- Be empathetic and in tune with players feelings. Players react best to coaches that take the time to understand them, which in turn increases motivation, loyalty and self esteem.
- Be honest and conduct yourself with integrity, be a role model, which is a powerful coaching tool.
- Make the sport fun. Do not lose the perspective that Rugby is a sport, a game, and games are by definition supposed to be fun. Be creative with training sessions to increase players’ enjoyment. When players enjoy themselves more they are more predisposed to perform better and to learn more.
- Do not be defensive with athletes or parents. As part of being a good communicator, be open to negative comments and feedback, and see those as opportunities, as stimulus to becoming a better coach everyday.
- Use any failures as valuable coaching opportunities. Keep in mind that relaxed players perform better and learn more, and that fear of making mistakes undermines this relaxed state. Give players permission to try things, to have a go, allow them to make mistakes without fear of retribution. Athletes will not make mistakes on purpose, but by calling attention to them with impatient or angry actions will only increase the possibility of repeat.
- Remember that accepting failure is a good thing, provide that both players and coaches learn from the experience and use it to get better, to improve as individuals and as a team. As it is often stated, champions make mistakes, but they do not make the same mistake twice.
- Remember that feedback is the champions’ breakfast.

References

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