Do you have to have been an elite player to be an elite coach?

Rationale

During my time as a player and a coach I have seen a number of coaching methods and techniques come and go. From my observation it seems that coaching technical aspects of our games works in fads. New things are tried and many are discarded.

When selecting a topic to write this paper on, I felt that if I was to focus on a specific technical aspect of the game, my findings or thoughts could easily become outdated. It is for this reason that I decided to write more about the psyche of coaching and elements of this that will remain true.

As a player I was fortunate enough to play at a level where I was exposed to some outstanding coaches. Unfortunately, I also experienced coaches that I perceived to be poor, or of little value to my personal development as a player. The rationale behind this paper relates to the fact that during my playing days I was coached at different times by two former Wallabies. One of these men was the best coach I ever had; the other was one of the poorest coaches I played under. It is for this reason that I have chosen to explore the question, “Do you have to have been an elite player to be an elite coach?”

The Coaches

In order to present a balanced argument I interviewed 4 coaches. John Mitchell, Ewen McKenzie, Chris Hickey and Andy Friend. In order to clarify and define the word “elite” I have taken the view that an elite player is someone who represented as a player at a Senior Provincial level or above. An “elite” coach is someone who has coached professionally for a number of years, and coached at an age national level or senior Provincial level and or above. Each of the coaches playing and coaching achievements
are listed at the end of this paper as Appendix 1. The questions I posed to each of these coaches are attached as Appendix 2.

Task 13

Throughout the world of sport there are a number of examples of successful and inspiring coaches who have risen to the top of the coaching ranks in their respective sports. Many of these coaches were not elite players of their sport yet were able to coach at the highest level. However in terms of coaching Rugby, there is a perception that in Australia being an elite player is often a pre-requisite for appointment to the top coaching jobs. Personally I believe that it is not a pre-requisite, but it certainly helps. After conversations with four leading coaches, I was able to gather the following ideas.

During the interview process I asked all four coaches about the personal attributes they had brought to their coaching. John Mitchell was the only coach who listed “a genuine passion for and a love of the game” as a personal attribute he possessed. However all coaches believe they were very good “man managers” and also very good “delegaters of responsibility”. It was very interesting to note that both John Mitchell and Ewen McKenzie felt that one of their strengths was being competent in “coaching the mental side of the game.” Whilst this may be coincidental, I find it interesting that the two coaches who were elite players have listed this as a strength. I think it stands to reason that being an elite player makes you acknowledge and understand the importance of the mental aspects of Rugby. I believe that having experienced all the mental variances gives you an advantage over coaches who have not felt and dealt with the mental aspects of our game. This knowledge can certainly assist in the preparation of your team and the individual players.

Ewen McKenzie and John Mitchell, former test players, both acknowledge that being elite players has made their transition to coaching easier than it would have been had they not been elite players. John Mitchell notes that his playing record has contributed to his success; however he believes that “being an All Black definitely opened doors, but when
these doors open you still have to deliver.” I believe this statement indicates that John is not prepared to hang his hat on what he did as a player. He desires coaching results regardless of his playing career. Ewen McKenzie believes that his playing career has benefited him as a coach because he has “been there and felt the pressure, so I understand the environment.” No doubt Ewen uses this experience to empathise with his players, therefore making him a better coach.

In contrast Chris and Andy offered a different point of view. Chris Hickey is a coach I have respected for a long time, and has also acted as a mentor for me. I think he puts the whole argument into perspective when he says “Not being an elite player meant I had to work hard to learn as much as I could about the whole game. A great deal of this came from interacting with players who had played at an elite level and through trial and error.” This comment indicates to me that no matter what your playing background is or was, if you are prepared to take the time to learn and seek knowledge, then you are well ahead of know all coaches.

Speaking candidly, Andy Friend understands that breaking down barriers with players is difficult. He says “Not being an elite player does make it more difficult initially because there is a huge ‘who the f#ck is that’ factor.” This is something that many coaches who were not elite players struggle with. If you have played at an elite level, in the eyes of most players, you immediately have credibility.

Andy Friend and Chris Hickey are coaches who were not classed as elite players, yet both are highly respected coaches with records that would be the envy of most professional Rugby coaches. Both men seem to agree that not being viewed as elite players means that they have had to employ a very strong work ethic. But I believe more importantly, Chris and Andy both make intelligent comments regarding how they are judged. Chris believes that “you gain credibility through your coaching ability instead of relying on your on-field achievements”. Supporting this comment Andy states “I’d say the key thing would be that I am judged solely on my coaching achievements and not how I may have been perceived as a player”. Both Chris and Andy make fantastic points, however, I believe
that by not having credibility as players they are (in fact) judged based entirely on their coaching achievements. If their coaching achievements are few and far between, their future employment opportunities become limited. As I am sure we all agree, very good coaches don’t always have winning results. It therefore stands to reason that although they may be very good coaches, if their team does not win, they have no fall back “credibility”. To nullify this risk both Andy and Chris understand the need to continually evolve.

All four coaches agreed that having the respect of your players was important to your success, but John Mitchell notes “respect and credibility is intangible” and he believes it is a day to day proposition. On some days his players “are right on board, other days you feel that you have lost them”. To combat this he also states that as a coach as long as you are “ever evolving, you will gain respect”. My personal opinion is that both John and Ewen command respect. Their feats as players, and their contribution to the game since playing ensures that it is very hard for them to be faulted. Conversely Ewen McKenzie believes that “you can’t underestimate the importance of respect”. Added to this comment comes a quote which from a personal level, certainly hit home. Ewen states “It’s easy to be liked, but harder to be respected”. In order to gain and maintain respect he is of the opinion that respect can be generated by being consistant with man management.

Taking into account the thoughts of my interviewees, and forming my own judgments, I have to take into account the current situation in the Australian Super 14 teams. Two of the sides are coached by former elite players, and the other two sides are coached by men who have modest playing records. However, they are all assisted by former Wallaby or State representatives. Perhaps former elite players are better suited to Assistant Coaching roles. That debate is a whole other paper so I will leave that question to be answered by another Level 3 candidate.

In conclusion I must acknowledge the obvious, notable coaches who have not played at the Provincial level or above include John Connolly, Alan Jones, Greg Smith, Bob Dwyer
and Rod Macqueen. The most successful of these coaches (Macqueen) was however a very prominent member of the very physical Warringah first grade team and he did represent Sydney on a number of occasions. Despite all five of these coaches not being elite Rugby players, they have coached Australia. In fact, from the last six Wallaby head coaches, only one (Eddie Jones – NSW 12 Caps) has been a player at a Provincial level. It therefore stands to reason that any Community Rugby Coach with an average playing record can rise to become the Wallaby Coach. I firmly believe that in Australia the coaching pathway to the Provincial and National level is not restricted to former elite players. It is obvious that former elite players have an advantage over their rivals, however taking advice from the four coaches I interviewed and continually working to learn more about the game will ensure that any coach has the chance to be in control of our national team
Appendix 1

Ewen McKenzie:
Playing Record – NSW Waratahs, ACT Brumbies, Wallabies.
Coaching Record – Assistant Brumbies, Assistant Wallabies, NSW Waratahs.

John Mitchell:
Playing Record – Waikato, New Zealand (1 Test as captain)
Coaching Record – Assistant Sale (U.K), Assistant England, New Zealand, Western Force.

Chris Hickey:
Playing Record – Jersey Flegg (Rugby League) Sub-Districts in Sydney
Coaching Record – Canberra Vikings, Eastwood, Australian U/21

Andy Friend:
Playing Record – Australian Schools, Royals (ACT), Wests (QLD)
Coaching Record – AIS Scholarship Coach, Waratah Skills Coach, Aust 7’s, Aust U/21 Assistant, Suntory (Japan), NSW Waratahs Assistant, London Harlequins.
Appendix 2

Level 3 Synopsis – Do have to have been an elite player to become an elite Coach?

1. Playing background?
2. Coaching background?
3. What did you find attractive about coaching and how did you get into it?
4. What attributes do you believe an elite coach requires to be successful?
5. What are the personal attributes you believe have made you successful at an elite level?
6. How does being/not being an elite player assist you as an elite coach?
7. Do you believe being/not being an elite player has made your coaching pathway more difficult? How and why?
8. It seems that respect and credibility often determines how players respond to your coaching. Your playing career aside, is it a goal of yours to gain respect and credibility and how have you achieved this?
9. Do you believe that being an elite player makes it easier to be an elite coach?