The Art of Coaching

This paper explores the relationship between coaching practice and player skill development. The link between a player’s skill development and the enjoyment of the game of rugby is a direct outcome of the ability of the coach to impart their knowledge, experience and passion for the game. This is the art of coaching; how coaches deliver their message as opposed to merely imparting technical and tactical knowledge. As a former NFL player once said of the great Vince Lombardi, “he gave me permission to dream, to believe in myself.” This analysis of the links between coaching and skill development will be concentrated on school rugby, club rugby and the institutional offerings of Rugby Development & Education programs.

Sport researchers have identified the characteristics of a good coach include;

- **Knowledge of the game** that is relevant to the standard of player they are coaching
- Provides an enjoyable, dynamic environment i.e. participants are having fun
- Able to keep participates engaged i.e., through voice, humour and use of whistle
- An ability to connect with players (and parents of junior players) and demonstrate genuine care and concern for the individual
- Use of cues to assist players in their learning and understanding
- Ability to ask relevant questions that draws out the knowledge and understand of players in order to clarify their learning
- Use technology effectively as a tool for learning

Hence, these principles should underpin the interactions between players and coach at all levels and be evident in the development and education programs offered by organisations.

1. **School Rugby**

Arguably, the stronghold of Schoolboy Rugby in NSW is through the Independent School System. This sees Secondary Schoolboys play their rugby on a Saturday through the GPS (Greater Public Schools), CAS (Combined Associated Schools) and ISA (Independent School Association). Primary school boys in the Independent School System play across schools across all three Associations. This paper focuses on Independent Schoolboys’ Rugby as well as Gala Days and Recruitment Programs.

It will be contended that there has been considerable decline in the quality of coaching in these institutions over the last ten years and this has had a significant impact on the skill development of players and their retention in the game. This can be attributed to the significant decline in males committing to the profession of teaching and the necessity of School Rugby programs to use non-teaching staff as coaches.
The decline of males in the teaching profession has been significant. In 2017, 18.3% of primary teachers were male (down from 28.5% in 1980) and 40% of secondary teachers were male (down from 53.9% in 1980). These figures are set to decline further evidence concluding that male teachers may face extinction in Australian primary schools by 2054 unless policy action is taken.

Whilst female teachers certainly make excellent rugby coaches, the declining number of male teachers is of importance to boys’ rugby in schools. Foundation rugby skills are taught in the primary years by those members of staff who take on coaching roles. This is where a boy’s confidence is built in this contact sport. Beyond a Smart Rugby accreditation, there are minimal professional development opportunities provided in a school context, that are NESA (NSW Education Standards Authority accredited). AIS (Association of Independent Schools) annually produces a calendar of approved professional development for teachers (both primary and secondary). This would be a vital conduit for teachers in schools to become aware of and participate in the refinement and development of their coaching skills. This still does not address the declining choice of males into the teaching profession.

In Independent Education all staff members are required to contribute to the co-curricular program, however rugby programs face a dual issue of declining male staff to take these positions and those who do, having limited coaching experience and qualifications. This has led to, in the last ten years, an increased need to employ non-teaching staff as coaches for Rugby teams. In the past this was very rare. The pool of potential coaches for Independent School Rugby programs falls basically to former alumni, university and GAP students. Whilst enthusiastic, they do not necessarily have the behavioural control techniques or depth of instructional knowledge and experience that a teacher does. Another observation of the non-teaching coach, is the decrease in connection to student and family that comes from that coach not being a part of the wider context of the school.

Many independent schools have changed their requirements around a teachers co-curricular requirements. Instead of being duty bound to coach during both the summer and winter seasons several schools now only require one season. This effectively halves the pool of potential coaches each semester. In 2017 at Cranbrook School in Sydney, the Rugby program had 300 players across 3-12 with 49 coaches/managers involved. Of this only 17 were teachers at the school. Therefore, 68% of the coaches were outside providers. This is a significant change from the past and is reflected similarly at most other Independent Schools. This brings about a multitude of issues. The quality of coaching was highly variable. At best they would coach for a maximum of three years so there is constant turnover and retraining required. If they are older coaches, they tend to have another mode of employment so this brings about issues with availability. If they are still playing themselves, they wish to be appointed to coach a year level that doesn’t conflict with their own club draw. These external coaches can have considerable knowledge of the game, however my observations have led me to conclude that they don’t bring the same expertise as a teacher does in terms of;

- Group management skills
- Communication skills
- Experience in teaching/coaching in variety of settings
- Broad understanding of skill development (especially compared to Physical Education staff)
- Structured, planned and sequential approach
- Knowledge of students and their families
- Respect from students
- Connection to the students: ability to follow up issues during the day at school
- Connection to the school: understanding of ethos of school, calendar dates
The question raised is should a school expect this of a non-teaching coach? The reality is, for skill development and depth of an Independent School Rugby Program is it needed. Thus, the leaders of rugby in schools have to allocate significant time to educate and mentor their coaches to ensure players have a positive and safe experience that will facilitate keeping them in the game. Schools must allocate further resources to the Head of Rugby roles: reviewing the significant teaching load, high amount of administration and the need to cover for absent coaches, which takes them away from mentoring existing coaches. These are impediments to improving and consolidating the future of Schoolboy Rugby in NSW.

2. Club Rugby

Club rugby embodies the true spirit of our game. From the city to the bush and up and down the coast rugby communities of all ages gather and play the game for the games sake. The resurgence of Club rugby is highlighted by the way in which the Shute Shield (Sydney) and Brisbane club competition has attracted renewed interest, tribalism and passion in recent seasons. So too, Country rugby is attracting good playing numbers and for many a sausage sandwich and a beverage down at the local rugby club is a sensational way to spend a Saturday afternoon. However, as with schools rugby, the quality of coaching is incredibly varied, and long term has significant impact on the future development of skills and retention of players in the game.

In terms of junior teams, it is generally a Dad who is ex-player who ends up with the coaching duties. Naturally, he brings his own rugby playing experiences to the table when he embarks on the coaching duties. These experiences tend to be somewhat out dated and tend to focus on results rather than player development. This profile of a coach is generally time poor. Busy work schedules allow for minimal planning and preparation time at best. The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) in their discussion paper Teaching Sport to Children (August 2017) note that this group of volunteers are unlikely to access coaching courses or formal qualifications. The challenge is how we cater and improve these standards. It is also unlikely that the junior coach has a teaching or educational background so he will likely find group management difficult and is could lack skills to keep the players actively engaged in the session in order to ensure a positive experience.

Clubs are then charged with upskilling these members. They too are volunteer based, time poor and resource constrained. Skill development and the imparting of a sequential junior coaching program is not necessarily a priority. The amazing outcome of this system is that the clubs produce and sustain great membership numbers in many settings. Junior players have opportunities through club representative pathways and again volunteers organise and stage representative events. Here, it is hoped, that a coach at this level would have greater experience and accreditation. However, institutionally there is no way of ensuring this.

3. Development, Education & Pathways staff

The profile of staff working in Rugby Development has changed considerably over the last five years. Previously, the majority of staff had a teaching background, enabling them to deliver high standard courses and role model best practice coaching. However, with the limited resources of the State Unions there are now a smaller number of fulltime development staff in the field. This has necessitated a greater proportion of casual staff in order to deliver the range of programs. Like many
of the part time coaches in schools, these tend to be university students with minimal work experience. This too poses issues around quality of communication, group management skills and hence the quality of program delivery. State Unions therefore need to recruit staff wisely, train them effectively and support/resource them adequately in the field to ensure quality assurance.

Changes around extending the online learning centre has brought about much positive change with regard to rugby education programs. With Smart Rugby now solely an online course along with a range of World Rugby and Rugby Australia endorsed modules, access has never been easier or flexible. However, Smart Rugby has become more about compliance than education. How then do we ensure our coaches have the skills they need to coach effectively?

Dr Wade Gilbert (Author of Coaching Better Every Season & Professor at California State University) suggests coaches require a practical toolbox of how to design a quality practice and tips on how to keep kids engaged that will lead to all having a positive experience. Many of these outcomes are imbedded in the Coaching Kids Rugby (CKR) Course. This is an excellent resource for coaches. This resource is not fully utilised by clubs and school coaches as it is limited by staff available to deliver it. So too, there scope to extend this resource into different age groups and formats (eg school teacher version).

Given many coaches are time poor, the 8 hour Foundation (Level One) Course is an effective use of their time to achieve compliance. However, it can be argued that this format does not provide a coach with enough practical delivery skills critique. On-going evaluation of the coaches’ progress and improvement at this level would enhance skill development in players.

Successful Coach Development requires leading coaches to be more involved in training emerging and developing coaches. Some of this is done in individual clubs/schools. However, National, State, U20 and Premiership coaches can be more fully utilised as presenters for coach education programs. It is through this we can truly model excellent coaching.

Summary:

Skill development and player retention in the junior framework is instrumental to the long term success of Rugby Union in Australia. As schools and clubs provide the majority of players the first opportunity to engage with the game and the spirit of rugby it is essential that resources are allocated to the coaches of these levels.

The changing gender balance of staff in schools, the decrease requirements of staff to contribute to co-curricular programs and the subsequent rise in casual coaches necessitate a new emphasis on coach accreditation, development and mentoring. At the club level, prioritising sequential coaching programs and supporting clubs with effective coach development programs through their state bodies must be a priority. Institutionally, the developments in online coaching has improved access to education programs for coaches, but significant advancements will only be made when a dedicated coach education unit is formed, by each of the state unions, to ensure that oversight occurs across all levels of the game.
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