ARU Level Three Coaching Course

Assignment Task #9:

“Match” Practice as a way of improving team preparation

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Rationale
This is a discussion piece aimed at discussing and challenging the traditional methods by which many of us were trained and how we currently train our athletes and teams. A significant amount of the concepts I describe throughout this piece, I have learnt from working with Dave Alred MBE for the past three seasons. In many ways this is a critical evaluation of my own coaching practice and planning, that I have gained throughout the Level 3 process. Even though this is a discussion paper, I will endeavour to credit especially Dave and other researchers / studies where possible.


**Introduction**

The ‘traditional’ season plan will, for those organised coaches, always include such aspects as;

- Key Dates (trials, competition dates)
- Periodization of light, medium & hard loads
- Length of Sessions
  - Even what is the main focus of each session normally the areas being;
    - Attack
    - Defence
    - Breakdown
    - Set Piece
- The more advanced coaches track how much time is spent on each aspect (refer App 1.1 & 1.2)

However even in these detailed accounts and even in App 1.2 which outlines and allows a large amount of time for unstructured game play, there is very little evidence or recording of “Match” (defined below) type practice.

A few main terms that I will refer to throughout this paper are outlined below. Dave Alred believes that ALL training/preparation can be segregated into 3 main aspects

1) **Repair** – the normal repetition and skill correction utilised by many coaches.
   
   I. A hooker throwing a ball at a static target
   II. 1 v 1 Breakdown technique from static start
   III. Catch Pass activity v no defence

2) **Training** – the ‘practice’ of a skill or movement in a slightly more open environment

   I. A forward pack practicing lineout calls and executing repeatedly
   II. 1 v 1 Breakdown practice on a whistle from a variety of locations, progress on to 2 v 2 or 3 v 3
   III. *Repeated* Attack and Decision Making vs active defence scenarios. Even if this is at high intensity and full contact, if there is repeated chances then it can only be classified as “Training”.

3) **Match** – much higher intensity, completely open environment with no repeated
“Match” Practice

situations. This does not just simply refer to training at match intensity. It also means training with the same consequences as a match. No second chances or opportunities to retry, just like in a match, you have one chance to execute or else you lose possession.

I. Forward pack contesting against full opposition. If a throw is not straight or incorrect there is NO redo or second chance, that teams loses possession just like in a match.

II. A breakdown activity to begin with and then whichever side wins possession, straight into attack v defence for a number of phases or until a score or mistake.

III. Unstructured play or attack vs defence but if there is an error or mistake, they do not get another chance. They lose possession until they can force a mistake from the opposition.

Through this paper I will discuss, that as coaches become more ‘organised’ and try to plan and control as many aspects of the week and training that we can, this can lead to a decrease in the amount of “MATCH” training time at a detriment to the team and individual.

Body

I. In terms of “Repair” training, this is predominantly a massive part of pre season or individual PSS training in sports such as rugby. The common belief I have observed is that, the more something is repeated, the better the execution will become. This is not the case in many situations. Along with athlete becoming bored and less engaged, the actual accuracy of the skill decreases after a maximum of 5 repetitions. Even as far back as 1980, a US Military study concluded that task repetition during training enhances retention of maintenance skill. But there was no improvement in execution after three repetitions and the accuracy began to decrease after five. This study has been backed up by many studies from Yale and AIS to name a few.
If we use the example from above in regards to the practicing catch & pass. It is easy to agree with the research that the first attempt may be a little low or high. The second we would hope the athlete improves on the error and by the third attempt, the skill is performed at a very high level. The temptation of the coach is then to continue this skill again, again and again. This is in the hope of the athlete progressing to the ‘Autonomous stage’ of skill acquisition. The coach feels good about this continued success initially but at times cannot understand why the high level isn’t maintained. However the research suggests that as coaches, we must modify the skill, target or scenario after 3-5 repetitions or else we will see a decrease in execution and engagement (Chow et al, 2007). This is only heightened now that the larger majority of our athletes are generation Y.

II. “Training” type practice is probably the most common type of training that rugby coaches and players participate in. Over recent years, coaches have become more adaptable at this form of practice replacing a lot of the time that traditionally used to be spent on “Repair”. Richard Shuttleworth (formerly with AIS and now with RFU) writes that manipulated practice will strengthen perception – action coupling, and through exaggeration of a problem, players can be guided to effective decisions and solutions. Thus “Training” is slower getting an athlete to reach a skill goal (more variables so more mistakes) than with “Repair” work but the athlete has a better understanding and the results are longer lasting.
“Match” Practice

Figure 1.2 – showing how “Training” is slower in gaining skill acquisition. (Dreyfus, 2010).

So whilst “Training” or as Dreyfus calls it PPK, may take longer to gain an improvement in skill, the effects will be longer lasting and the athlete will have a greater understanding of WHY (Sinek, 2011). Shuttleworth also argues that the greater randomisation of this type of practice, the greater the learning especially for decision making. Whereas Alred is careful to stipulate that coaches need to identify skills that need “Repair” and to revisit those, whilst still not being afraid of mistakes and stopping drills every 3 sec.

By following these edicts, coaches should progress faster into “Training” type of activities and not be afraid of mistakes or things not looking perfect. This will lead to greater understanding and therefor produce more intelligent performers that will understand the better options and not only perform at a higher level but also assist others within the team.

III. “Match” type practice does not simply refer the level of intensity and contact. It can also be performed in semi contact scenarios at high speed but the important aspect is replicating match consequences. A traditional ‘Captain’s run’ is NOT Match practice. If it is unopposed, it would only be classified as Training and almost Repair type work. Many coaches fool ourselves by saying yes we did some match preparation by having 15min unopposed team run. In reality could not be further from what a match is like.

An example of a “Match” type session could be if you are working on strike moves off lineouts (against live defence) and the lineout is not straight, there are no second chances. You would progress on to the next move or make the team work in defence for a phase or two. Similar to “Training”, Alred discusses that whilst it is important for coaches to set strict guidelines and not be afraid of things going wrong. Skill imperfections need to be noted and worked on at another time during a “Repair” section of that session or the next.
This type of practice can have an increase in the level of anxiety perceived by the players and in doing so helps them learn how to manage such emotions. This increased level of mental intensity also helps alleviate boredom that is sometimes associated with monotonous replication work.

I have found it difficult as a coach to incorporate this type a practice because, I want to get things right. Using the example above, if we know we need to work on lineout strike moves and the lineout is not straight, it is very difficult to blow the whistle and award a scrum to the 2nds or move on to scrum strikes. However I have also learnt that the team and athletes are learning a lot more from the harsh reality of “Match” practice rather than me or the other coaches allowing them have another go, which will NOT happen on Saturday. Appendix 1.3 shows an example of how a session could be planned out to help ensure a certain amount of Match practice occurs.

Match practice is not only relevant to ‘team based’ activities. Dave developed this terminology and theory through his work with elite goal kickers and golfers. So with that in mind, even individual PSS work should include some Match style work every session as briefly outlined in the introduction. Another example could be;

- For a goal kicker – after some repair work (developing follow through)
  - Then some training, in terms of aiming at one post
  - The coach randomly selects spots to kick from and they only get one chance from each.

**Conclusion**

Even the very detailed plans of App 1.1 and 1.2, whilst unequivocally outlining how much time is to be spent on almost every possible aspect and also outlining the intensity of the training load there is no measure of Match type practice. App 1.2 details some fairly significant time for ‘unstructured’ attack vs defence games particularly in pre season but this decreases as regular season starts. App 1.3 is a very simple example of how all 3 could be tracked and managed through each session and the season, by listing Repair, Training or Match next to each activity.

As the training week becomes more congested and more structured whilst continuing to cover all the unique aspects of the game of Rugby (Attack, Defence, Set Piece, Breakdown etc), it is equally important to ensure that all aspects are practiced at Match Intensity. All of these aspects/skills should be worked on through REPAIR, TRAINING and MATCH type practice. It is in no way suggesting more work, just a restructuring of how the work is currently being completed to ensure the not only the greatest outcome for our athletes but also ensuring training is engaging and relevant to the environment in which they compete each week.
I am not suggesting that everything has to be Match type practice. The game of rugby is too unique and requires such a wide variety of skills that demand development. Repair, Training and Match all crucial part of an individual’s and team’s preparation. Through allowing there to be a greater amount of Match style learning, yes there will be more mistakes, but as discussed by Alred, the overall development of skills and team’s ability to not only cope but thrive in pressure decision making situations will be dramatically improved.
Appendix

Appendix 1.1 – example of a detailed season training plan

Appendix 1.2 – example of detailed season training plan
Appendix 1.3 – simple example of how a training plan could be developed to track the amount of “Match” training that is completed.

### In Season, Rd 3, Session #1 TSS 1st XV
#### Skills & Work Outs (GT Week)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Drill</th>
<th>Equipment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3:45pm-3:55pm</td>
<td>GSS &amp; Dynamic Warm Up</td>
<td></td>
<td>HYDRATE AFTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:55pm-4:15pm</td>
<td>Catch/Pass/Support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:10pm-4:15pm</td>
<td>Spark Activity</td>
<td>Continuous LVF with partner</td>
<td>In PAIRS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:15pm-4:20pm</td>
<td>MOF</td>
<td>MOF from strong Jackie</td>
<td>12 Balls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:20pm-4:25pm</td>
<td>DM in MOF</td>
<td>Pop &amp; Jackie with added support attacker Make choice to Jackie or take space</td>
<td>Groups of 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:25-4:30pm</td>
<td>KILL Technique</td>
<td>2v1 Mummy/Daddy KILL Tech</td>
<td>In Pairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:30pm-4:35pm</td>
<td>DM in MOF</td>
<td>Pop &amp; Jackie with added with extra defender Make choice to Jackie or take space “Punch or plug”</td>
<td>Groups of 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:35-4:40pm</td>
<td>DM in MOF</td>
<td>With EXTRA defender, Contact basic over the ball</td>
<td>Groups of 4 HYDRATE AFTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:45pm-5:00pm</td>
<td>UNIT Skills</td>
<td>Backs - Unstructured attack</td>
<td>6 Balls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:00pm-5:05pm</td>
<td>Strike Plays</td>
<td>Escort lines in counter</td>
<td>HYDRATE AFTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:05pm-5:15pm</td>
<td>MATCH</td>
<td>Forwards - 1v1 scrum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
Large number of injured bodies, only light contact, focus more on technique
Lance Issues, to be presented. Allow time for introduction at start.

**Evaluation / Reflection** – cancelled ‘punch through’ contact in attack, worked on KILL technique instead.
Developed intensity with lots of injured boys and restructured as we went.
Also please see attached strength, review and other interesting aspects.
References & Readings

http://www.davealred.com/
http://danielson.laurentian.ca/drdnotes/2206-5_schmidt_ch09.html


Dreyfus, Stuart E.; Dreyfus, Hubert L. "A Five-Stage Model of the Mental Activities Involved in Directed Skill Acquisition". Washington, DC: Storming Media. 2010.