How to develop the instinctive player

By Ben Rutherford
Rugby can be an exciting, exhilarating game to watch and be involved with. Unfortunately constant law changes which sometimes confuse all involved as well as strict systems and structures coaches adopt and preach, are quickly forcing instinctive, creative players to become robots.

When you think of current or former instinctive players the names Campese, Carter, Barrett, Cooper, Beale, Cullen & co spring to mind. The QLD Reds team that won the 2011 Super Rugby championship played some of the most thrilling and entertaining rugby in recent memory. And the obvious benchmark in the form of the All Blacks play a structured style of rugby but one that’s heavily reliant on unbelievable and incredible skills, particular focused on the basics such as catch/pass, re-alignment, etc.

**How do we help develop the instinctive player?**

Is our fixation with winning (and more often than not keeping our jobs) taking away the ability of players to literally play off the cuff and back themselves? More often than not, coaches have varying systems and strategies of how to play the game in a structured way and want bigger, stronger, faster athletes who effectively become puppets. If a player suddenly takes the bull by the horns and tries something different, they quickly find themselves outside the circle of trust and not in the team.

With the current set-up of junior academies and development squads – we’re moving towards an era of full time rugby trainers not players. Therefore it’s fair to question whether the natural, off the cuff skills players possess are being killed off or lost amongst the dedication to perfection of structure and systems in today’s game. Are the players better off playing week-in/week-out as opposed to being regularly ‘rested’ so they can train during the week? Or do we need to change the way training is structured to further develop naturally gifted, instinctive players?

According to dictionary.com, ‘instinct’ is referred to as “a natural or innate impulse, inclination, or tendency” ¹ As coaches, our role is to develop player skill sets to the point, that these are what they instantly use under pressure because it comes naturally.

This paper will explore theories as well as insights into how the world as we know it is changing, more often than not, due to an obsession with technology and social media that didn’t previously exist. But more importantly, why often what looks to be a magical play is actually the result of a focus on ‘deliberate practice’ and varying coaching methods.

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¹ [http://www.dictionary.com/browse/instinct](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/instinct)
English Rugby – a new vision

Anyone involved in rugby will know the name Eddie Jones – a former Wallaby coach, with experience coaching the likes of the Brumbies, Reds, SunTory, Springboks and Japan, who now leads English rugby as head coach of the national team. More often than not, Jones is a leader and at the forefront of experimenting or trying new ways to do things in the rugby environment.

Recently, Jones hired Dr Sherylle Calder, a South African vision specialist to help his players develop and improve hand-eye coordination. Calder believes the deterioration in skill and visual awareness is a result of today’s elite athletes obsession with phones and social media apps. ²

“We have seen in the last five or six years when we assess elite players in different sports that there is a decline in skill levels. When you look at your phone there are no eye movements happening and everything is pretty static.”

“We are losing the ability to communicate well and all those skills are declining. We will be working really hard on awareness because awareness helps you make effective decisions under pressure.”

“We develop skills by climbing trees, walking on walls and falling off and learning all those visual motor skills which people aren’t doing any more. Young kids spend a lot of time on mobile phones so those instinctive natural skills are disappearing.”

What is deliberate practice?

According to James Clear, a popular author with over 400,000 email subscribers, deliberate practice is defined as ³ “a special type of practice that is purposeful and systematic. While regular practice might include mindless repetitions, deliberate practice requires focused attention and is conducted with the specific goal of improving performance.”

However what is incredibly important, especially as coaches, is to ensure deliberate practice is openly differentiated from mindlessly repeating an activity over and over without any clear goal of what we want our players to accomplish. Therefore feedback is essential and comes in the form of measurement and coaching.

Individuals are capable of measuring improvement for better or worse – with a particular emphasis on rugby, this can include the ability for a hooker to hit a specific jumper a certain number out of ten throws, a goal kicker taking shots at goal from the same position a set number of times or even a beep test score before a ball is kicked in anger versus season kick-off.


³ http://jamesclear.com/beginners-guide-deliberate-practice

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As coaches it’s absolutely essential we provide feedback to players because whilst individual measurement is important, accountability and working to fine-tune minor details is what makes good players great. Without this feedback, there’s a chance players assume they’re getting better by doing more of the same.

Coaches should seek to create an approach of repeat efforts to develop motivation through both positive and negative feedback, both with a purpose. If this type of environment is built and effectively driven long term by players, it’s inevitable that significant improvement and associated success will follow.

The easiest way to do this is to initiate position specific skills sessions before or after training sessions, to see whether deliberate practice habits exist or need to be established. A halfback who throws 25 passes to his left and another 25 to his right, focusing on a specific target and ticking all the fundamental boxes, is more likely to increase his or her chance of becoming a better player and being able to really deliver when it matters. By isolating critical components of the game, the goal is these skills will quickly become second nature and in the heat of battle, will give the players an opportunity to deliver when it really matters.

Deliberate practice examples include:

- The story of how as a youngster, Sir Donald Bradman would use a single cricket stump to repeatedly hit a golf ball against the family water tank, quickly adjusting to how the ball bounced back off the curved edges and as a result, developing incredible hand-eye coordination.

- Hitting a pitching wedge 100 times, aiming to leave the ball within 20 feet of the pin 75% of the time – continually observing results and making appropriate adjustments, and doing that for hours every day - that's deliberate practice.

Best selling author Malcolm Gladwell wrote in his book Outliers, about the ten thousand hour rule. He used it to highlight the fact a band from Liverpool, England took an opportunity to play strip clubs in Hamburg, Germany so they could constantly practice and play countless live sets night after night, in the hope that one day they’d have a hit. They just so happened to be The Beatles.

In a nutshell, the idea is that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice are needed to become world-class in any field. Whilst some players seek to become world class, not every player we coach will – regardless there’s no disputing that repetition with corrective coaching can lead to improvements.

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Successful secrets OR hard work and dedication

It’s common knowledge that some of the best athletes of all time were also the hardest working trainers in their chosen field. Michael Jordan drove himself as well as teammates and coaches crazy with his commitment to perfection.  

Legendary Los Angeles Lakers player Kobe Bryant constantly drove deliberate practice methods that ensured he was at the peak of his powers in the NBA for 20 years.

There are no short cuts to success but with a specific plan that focuses on deliberate practice as well as coaches empowering players to make their own decisions under pressure, the likelihood of naturally instinctive players succeeding rises. Talent doesn't mean intelligence, motivation or personality traits - it's an ability to do some specific activity especially well. By over-coaching and not allowing players to make mistakes at training by trusting their gut instincts, the end result often means frustrating errors in games.

The best explanation of what it takes to help players show their natural instincts belongs to Tim S. Grover, CEO of ATTACK Athletics, world-renowned for his work with championship and Hall of Fame athletes and a best-selling author.

“Talent can make you good; it gives you the opportunity to develop skill. Skill can make you great; it gives you the opportunity to develop that talent to the point where you can trust your instincts to take over. Instinct is what allows you to become unstoppable, to control your environment without having to think, the ability to walk through a dark room without bumping into furniture. A baseball player can feel when he’s hit the ball out of the park. A basketball player doesn’t have to watch the ball go in the hoop. They just know. That’s instinct. Talent, skill, instinct ... good, great, unstoppable.”

“You can’t achieve any of that by training for a single statistic on a standardized test—no matter how hard you work at it. Everything you do must have a purpose that leads to results. Nothing left to random chance, because random actions get random results.”

In summary, the essential ingredients for coaches to develop instinctive players include:

- deliberate practice with regular feedback on minor details
- individual measurements to avoid boring, repetitive drills with no focus or goal
- empowerment to back core skills under pressure at all times
- allow players to make mistakes at training whilst trying different ways to achieve the same result

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5 http://www.espn.com/chicago/columns/story?id=4463664&columnist=isaacson_melissa
6 https://addicted2success.com/motivation/why-kobe-bryants-work-ethic-is-so-untouchable/
7 http://www.si.com/edge/2014/10/16/tim-grover-talent-isnt-enough

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