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ARU Performance Coach Course  
Assessment task #9 – Written Assignment

IMPROVING TACTICAL DEVELOPMENT

Tactical development is based around ‘multiple repetitions of theoretical concepts, following a general philosophy’ (Rui Faria, 2003), and is improved step by step once 3 major individual player elements have been acquired;

1. Strong technical ability  
2. Sound understanding of the game  
3. Optimal physical development

Tactical development is directly dependent on the quality of the technical and physical abilities of the players. It is unrealistic to follow tactical options knowing that the level of fitness and the technical abilities of the majority of the players will not be up to the task. The key to successful tactical development is ensuring that these elements are in place beforehand so that all tactical and decision making processes on the field can follow the overall strategy of the team with maximum efficiency.

The tactical plan-of-action that a team will follow during their games should reflect both the coach’s philosophy on the game and the strengths and weaknesses of his players. In it the coach should define the individual and unit roles both in attack and defence, with the goal of setting realistic and agreed upon (this is important as total buy in from the players is essential) objectives for the team to pursue.

The ultimate role of any good coach then is to create a new dimension of the game, where the peak tactical performance of his team is beyond the sum of all individual techniques. This happens when the best prepared teams reach certain fluidity and superior coherence in all aspects of their tactical field performances. A good example of this was the Highlanders Super 15 semi final victory over the Waratahs in 2015.

While there are still positions regarded as tactical positions, such as scrum half and fly half, the increased speed of the modern game means that players are now unable to refer to another team member for guidance and decisions must be made instantly to carry on the momentum. Therefore developing a tactical decision maker in every Player is an increasing necessity. It is here that the utilization of a tactical plan will be invaluable and it should involve 2 stages.

1. The coaching staff selects appropriate solutions to anticipated scenarios to be encountered during a game.
2. Practicing both offense and defence scenarios in training until complete assimilation and automation has been achieved.

Players will then theoretically be able to anticipate both their own teammate’s actions and the opposition’s moves to secure the most favorable position on the field. Communication between players in a unit, and from unit to unit, must be optimum and well rehearsed.

It is against this backdrop that the concept of tactical periodization has begun to gain wide acceptance among elite coaches. It has become the latest coaching buzzword but what exactly does it involve?

Developed at the University of Porto (Portugal) it has been adopted with great success by Premier League soccer coaches such as Jose Mourinho and Andre Villas Boas. The premise is that multi-dimensional games like soccer and rugby revolve around four moments, so by following the principles of specificity, at least one of these four moments of the game should be present in every training exercise.

The tactical principles of play refer to a set of match play patterns that a coach wants a team to adopt at any of the four moments of the game. It is how a coach wants his team to play rugby. Given the high unpredictability that exists during a match, a good coach tries to create predictability through preparation, planning and training. Every training session is designed to fit the coach’s philosophy and through systematic repetition the players are able to build these match play patterns into habits. Once habits are established, decision making and reaction times can be reduced substantially. This type of training is intended to prepare a player to understand and react more quickly to every possible game situation.
‘To me, the most important aspect in my teams is to have a defined game model, a set of principles that provides organization. Therefore, since the first day our attention is directed to achieve that’ (Mourinho, 2006). What he is saying is decide on your philosophy and game models and then gear all of your training around that. In turn, every training exercise focuses on at least one of the moments, and always follows the coach’s tactical game model of how he wants his team to play.

The aim then is to develop players to rapidly alter the on-field behaviours according to the tactical context of the match, and what actually unfolds in front of them. In doing so players prepare and learn how best to deal with unpredictability.

**Principles of Play**

As there are several related variables involved Principles of Play are complex concepts. This is why tactical periodization breaks them down to reduce this complexity. The principles of play are broken down into sub-principles and these are further fragmented into sub-sub-principles. The aim of this is to make it as easy as possible for the players to understand. Each specific principle of the game model is directly related to one of the four moments in the game as outlined.

**Attack Organization**

“Training is worth it only when it lets you make your ideas and principles operational. Thus, the coach has to find exercises to guide his team to do what it is intended to do in the game.” (Mourinho, 2006.) Creating appropriate exercises is the best way to teach
or improve a particular principle or sub-principle of a game model. The configuration of the exercises (e.g., playing space, number of players, rules and objectives) must promote the appearance of the required behaviours, what are called 'conditioned practices'. For example, setting up an exercise where a team's defensive system is under-loaded and is constantly defending will make behaviours related to its defensive organization emerge. Then, there will be a host of opportunities for coaches and players to 'shape' these behaviours.

Transition from Attack to Defence

Moments of the game
Transition from attack to defence

Main Principle
Fill the D-line: maintain integrity
'No shooters'

Sub-principle
1st contact behind A-line:
Commit numbers to breakdown to win ball back

Sub-sub-principle
Counter ruck policy applies

Sub-principle
1st contact at or beyond A-line:
Don't compete – set D line

Sub-sub-principle
High line speed after 1st phase:
No passive mindset

Defensive Organization

Moments of the game
Defensive organization

Main principle
Get the ball back off the opposition:
Turnover/penalty/kick

Sub-principle
Interior D sequence
Hold & fold principles

Sub-sub-principle
Control, communication, spacing, line speed

Sub-principle
Tackle policy:
Tackler + 1

Sub-sub-principle
Chop tackle & hunter 'jackals'
**Transition from Defence to Attack**

- **Moment of the game**
  Transition from defence to attack

- **Main principle**
  Lift tempo to gain linebreak within 2 phases of turnover

- **Sub-principle**
  2-pass shift:
  Move the point of focus away from the turnover zone

- **Sub-principle**
  10 seconds of fury:
  Take full advantage of the chaos

- **Sub-sub-principle**
  3rd man becomes the primary decision maker

- **Sub-sub-principle**
  Heads up – play what is in front of you

In tactical development the limiting factors of the learning process are the same as those when approaching technical development.

1. Coaches need to appreciate that not every player learns at the same speed. Some individuals are faster learners and master concepts and techniques quicker than others, which can create a disparity throughout the team. By using concise briefings, kinesthetic demonstration and utilizing senior players, and fast learners as tutors, can increase the process of development.

2. While it is imperative to tactically train under the condition of fatigue, coaches must avoid teaching new skills or concepts when the players are tired. Tactical retention is most effective under conditions of mental and physical freshness.

However, the corrections of tactical mistakes must be done under fatigue. You need to correct tactical mistakes under game conditions when the players experience high levels of fatigue. By applying this method you are in fact achieving two important goals: training your players to cope with fatigue and correcting mistakes in an environment that causes the mistakes in the first place.