Are we coaching skills or coaching for results?  

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The greatest problem with coaching today is that a majority of coaches fail to coach.

Interestingly the word coach is used to describe somebody who trains sports players and athletes. So possibly coaches should be referred to as trainers. The meaning of the verb ‘train’ as defined in the Encarta Dictionary is ‘to learn or teach somebody the skills necessary to do a particular job especially through practical experience.’

Coaches are more interested in the result and statistics and are driven by the pressure to deliver. Skill development plays a minor role in weekly preparation as the big picture of success consumes the basics and their application.

A large part of coaching time these days is spent on executing designed plays, moves and set piece maneuvers, all very complex in nature and requiring player understanding to be successful. But what about the skill components that are required to be able to execute these plays? Are we equipping the players with the required skill sets to be able to achieve a positive experience?

In general statistical terms the game of Rugby Union is a simple one. Score more points than your opposition and you win. Score less and you lose. Score lines never define the true nature of the game; they are outcome based and never truly reflect performance.

Good games of rugby are made up by a multitude of complex skills performed well under pressure, tied together by either inherent or refined skills. Poor rugby games are full of mistakes, poor skill execution and timing, missed tackles and missed opportunities. The game looks untidy, hard to follow and is stop start in nature. The absence of skill is the footnote to a poor game.

So it is skill or the lack of it that determines the games outcome. There is a fine line between good and bad in terms of skill. One second too early or too late and the pass may never find the mark. A poor lift, a bad throw or no extension and the lineout is lost. An inch too high or too low in the scrum and the advantage is gone. All across the game, teams and players play in inches and seconds and their execution of basic skill within these perimeters determine the success of that action.

As the old saying goes “Practice makes perfect”, in a sense this is right, although I prefer the improved version ‘perfect practice makes perfect’. Studies show that it takes 500 hours to change a habit and refine a skill. I wonder in how many of those hours are the skill being performed well and to an acceptable standard.

It would be great as a coach to have 500 hours allocated to skill training and development within their program. The reality for club, school or junior coaches is that they have two 90 minutes sessions within a week if you are lucky. Each and every one of these minutes will ultimately contribute to the outcome of the weekly match.
Gone are the days of starting with a few laps and finishing with some touch and some rugby skills in between. Coaches today have to prepare to the minute, using every available second afforded to them. The question is how much time do we devote to skills within a program? Do we spend the majority of our time on set piece, unit skills, defence and team work or do we concentrate on all individual skills that when collectively combined will lead to a successful rugby outcome.

Over the years the rules have changed to effect styles of play, but the basics of the game have remain unchanged. If players can catch, pass, tackle and maintain possession effectively they will enjoy many more positive experiences than those who are deficient in these skills. Coaches need to tie these core skills to the Principles of team play that include Go Forward, Support, Continuity and Pressure. If this is transferred successfully players will learn the game and have a true understanding of the basics.

With this in mind surely more training should be directed toward basic skill development and to the understanding of the principles of the game rather than focused around intricate plays and team formations and phase construction.

The long hours of skill development should start in the pre season and be an ongoing dimension of training throughout the year. Coaches need to be creative and make skill training fun and competitive. If coaches set high skill standards and are uncompromising in pursuit of there outcomes then players will understand what is required at trainings and in games. If the coach compromises his high standards and allows poor skill execution at training these habits will transfer into game situations. All skill executions can be measured and refined in every session. It is important for the players to get feedback either before, during or after each training session. Positive or negative affirmations must be followed by descriptive messages on how to improve on the skill or on why the skill outcome was positive.

Coaches need to be aware that there are three stages of motor learning and that players will need to gain competence and confidence in basic skill execution to move from a novice to an experienced player. The first stage is the Cognitive stage where players are exposed to new skills and take time to adjust and understand what is required. Many mistakes are made in this stage and it is through feedback, familiarity and repetition that skills are mastered. The Second stage is the Associative stage where players can exhibit skills in games but usually have to think about what to do and when to do it. The third stage is the Autonomous stage where players exhibit skills and make skill decisions under pressure in game situations or simulations.

Coaches need to understand these developmental stages and be perceptive in structuring skill and unit specifics within the capabilities of their players. Player ability and knowledge of the game will progress through understanding and practice, but coaches must lead them through these stages of learning so that their progression complements their ability.
Teams will play the way they are coached. Players will exhibit the skills in games that they practice in training. Rugby outcomes are defined by the scoreboard on the weekend but are derived from the skills exhibited and refined at training during the week. So the training becomes the means to the end and must be well structured, monitored and refined to enable maximum realization of potential.

We simply don’t just have to give more skill instruction at training. We have to transfer this progression into a game or contact situation to enable players to get a feel and understanding of how the execution of skills affect the outcomes in games. Once the basic skills have been covered, these skills must be used in either a closed or open drill that requires players to exhibit skill and more importantly make decisions based on opportunity or threats from opposition players. Throughout these drills or modified games, coaches must give feedback, lead discussion and challenge players to exhibit high quality skills under pressure. If players have success in this environment they will be able to transfer these positive involvements into games.

Once players are put under pressure in game simulated contests at training they will get a better understanding on why basic skill training is so important to them. They will start to appreciate the little things that need to be covered in order to achieve a positive outcome at training and in games. Once players gain an understanding of why they train they become more productive and effective contributors on game day.

Coaches may never get the 500 hours to refine skill and change habits. They can however if prepared and organized make significant skill improvements to increase an understanding of the basics skills required to produce quality involvements in games.

Setting and maintain high standards of skill execution at training is the most important coaching ingredient that will contribute to successful executions in games. So the onus is firmly on the coach to provide the framework, time and opportunity for players to refine their skills. If coaches understand that basic skill development is important, they then can construct training sessions that are, enjoyable, competitive and specific to the needs of their players. Once the standard is set players have no option but to work hard to achieve the outcomes that the coach has planned in each and every session.

Too many coaches make the mistake of watching International and Super 12 matches and return to the training field armed with playbooks, advanced phase options and intricate moves. Coaches must never get to far away from adhering to the basic principles and skills of the game. If teams are efficient in these skills and perform the principles of play well they will always have a positive experience. Players know when they or the team have played well and judge themselves on their overall performance whether that is reflected on the scoreboard is inconsequential. The scoreboard is only a descriptive footnote to the game and does no indicate the presence or absence of skill.

So let’s change the name of Coach to Trainer and get back to winning matches at all levels by teaching players the skills needed to play the game, using practical experiences which involve competition, understanding and enjoyment.