Firstly I would like to explain my reason for selecting a subject that is probably viewed by most as “outside the box” when it comes to writing a paper as a rugby union coach. Most would expect something along the lines of a more traditional area of discussion such as Lineouts or attack philosophies, defence systems etc.

As sport and particularly coaching evolves, the roles and responsibilities of a coach are becoming more complex and their required skill set more diverse especially in the professional arena.

I chose Mental Health / Mental Toughness as a topic of discussion, in part, because this subject is not restricted to a particular sport and in fact is not restricted to just sport. It is something that affects people in every aspect of their day to day lives and for some it has a major and far reaching impact. Those effects can be both positive and negative. In that regard I think this topic has a connection with a far more diverse and far reaching audience and ultimately opening up the lines of communication between a far broader group exposing us to a greater volume of experiences and outcomes, helping us to develop as coaches and mentors.

If as a coach we can use an experience relayed through a discussion, like this, and it enables us to assist a player, or ourselves for that matter, to progress then I feel we are meeting some of our obligations as coaches and mentor’s.

I have seen and, in some case’s experienced the full spectrum of both mental health and mental toughness from a coaches view point, a parents view point and of course from personal experience. I have seen how athletes cope, or not, mentally with things like injury, non-selection and the like. I have seen how forces outside of Rugby have influenced their state of mind inside of their rugby world. It is an area that I find very interesting.

For the purpose of this discussion I will focus on the subject from a coach’s perspective.

It is a common misconception that someone suffering from a mental health issue is mentally weak, comments like “they just need to toughen up and get on with it” aren’t unusual especially in the sporting arena and in some cases that may be the case. The skill required for us as coaches is being able to identify that that is the case. To recognise the difference between someone who is suffering from a mental health issue compared to someone who lacks mental toughness or desire to push through barriers and take things to the next level. A lack of understanding is unfortunately common place and mental health is an area that, in the past, is more likely to have been avoided by coaches rather than addressed. Having the ability to recognise the difference between an athlete who is suffering a mental health issue compared to an athlete who has a lack of, or in some cases to much mental toughness, for instance compromising their physical wellbeing, is a skill that is becoming more and more important from a coaching point of view.
Creating an environment as a coach where players feel comfortable enough to approach you with mental health issues in confidence is of benefit to all concerned. Having the respect of you’re playing group to a point where you are seen to be someone they can turn to with such personal issues is something every coach should strive for. Becoming that coach will have an immeasurable positive impact not only on your playing group but also your support staff and people in your everyday life.

Firstly we need to define the two different areas so it is easier to categorise the athlete in question.

Mental Health is a diagnosable illness which affects a person’s thinking, emotional state and behaviour. It can take on many forms, Terms used to describe some mental health issues that are probably more recognised by most of us are Depression and Anxiety these are known as Mood disorders.

Addictions are another form of mental illness. Some of which most of us are aware of or have possibly been exposed to through people we have come into contact with along the way. Addictions to things like alcohol, gambling and drugs are also a mental health issue.

Mental health in Rugby will show itself in ways that we can link to the game itself and the athlete’s ability to perform. For instance it can and will disrupt a person’s ability to carry out daily activities. In a rugby environment this may show itself as lack of concentration or they may struggle to apply themselves in the gym or on the training field, the athlete may find it difficult to engage with team mates or the coach. An indicator may be something like often arguing the point. Another indicator is what could be seen as tardiness, things like being late for meetings or trainings maybe signs that a player is struggling with a mental health issue.

A player’s mental health can be impacted by many things but from a rugby perspective or sport in general, for that matter, such things as listed below are possible triggers we need to be aware of as coaches.

- Injuries
- Selection
- Cultural background
- Travel
- Family

Mental health is something as a coach we need to be aware of and through education have the ability to recognise. By utilising that skill we can then engage with the particular person and open the lines of communication, in doing so we can help that person to take the next step. As a coach, for instance, that may just be lending an ear or say introducing them to a specialist in the field. As a coach or mentor our job is to recognise there is a problem and provide a conduit for that athlete to gain professional help.

It is not our place to diagnose or treat mental health issues, leave that to the professionals.
As a coach my understanding of the Mental Toughness of an athlete is their ability to focus on the task at hand and not to be influenced or distracted by forces outside the perimeters of that particular task. People who set goals and are driven to succeed show strong mental toughness. To stay focused, to push themselves beyond their perceived boundary’s, putting pain, fatigue, setbacks and emotions aside to achieve their goal. People who show these qualities I would suggest have the advantage of mental health wellbeing.

In contrast to a player’s state of mental health, as a coach we are in a position to have a major effect on an athlete’s mental toughness. With the right approach we can encourage, help and actually change the athlete’s attitude. I do think there is a connection between attitude and mental toughness. This is where the difference between coaching styles becomes a point of difference.

Engaging the athlete and creating a relationship beyond player / coach becomes important rather than the toughen up and get on with it or be dropped type approach. Recognising and activating the areas that trigger an athletes mental toughness is very important, if as coaches we want to get the best out of our players. It may be something as simple as being aware of their injury background or something more complex as their Cultural upbringing.

Having the ability or skill set as a coach to be able to create a connection with a player to the point that the player adjusts his attitude creating a strong and robust mental toughness to a point where he wants to contribute fully to the team’s success and plays for you is the ultimate goal I have as a coach. If you have that ability then you are a long way to preparing a successful “Team”

Something to keep in mind is utilising support staff in areas of their expertise as head coach allowing us to spend more time and energy on “man management” if and when required.

The ability to connect and interact with athletes takes on many forms as a coach. I don’t believe you earn respect I think everyone has the right to be respected initially and that respect is maintained and either built on or lost through our actions. Recognising and acting in a professional, positive and understanding way in areas such as mental health and mental toughness is one way we can build on that respect from the people who look to us for guidance, advice and reassurance.

Whether we like it or not the role of a coach in the modern era is far more than just turning up with a set of drills and a game plan. I would suggest that in the modern game mental preparation is one of the most key elements in a team’s preparation. To achieve that highest possible point our athletes need to have a healthy state of mind and a positive state of mental toughness. If we can achieve that along with good player skill set and well thought out game plans then we are a long way to being successful coaches.