Understanding and coaching Polynesian Island youth at an elite level.

ARU L3 COACHING ASSIGNMENT:  by Archie Kennedy

Immigration patterns
There is an ever-increasing number of Polynesian Islanders immigrating to the lucky country. The steady migration of South Sea islanders over recent years is becoming more and more evident in pocket suburbs of major Australian cities. The streets of Apia in Western Samoa are becoming quieter as more of the Samoan population seeks out a new life of opportunity in countries like Australia and New Zealand. To a some what lesser degree with other island nations such as Tonga and the Cook islands, Tuvalu and Nauru. In most cases the migration pattern is generally the same with young families entering this country via New Zealand and it’s Polynesian immigration policy, then benefiting from the relaxed trans Tasman entry visa’s allowing for temporary residence in Australia. These new families are assisted by local Island communities that are already well established and through various networks enter the Australian workforce within a short period of time. The majority will take jobs as factory laborers or other low skill type work. Many males take on security style work either as their primary job or to supplement their income. There are more people in recent years arriving with higher education certificates or professionals in various fields. In time this family unit will become self-supporting and move to it’s own nearby location and then often proceed to bring over more of the extended family from the home country. The favored destination for the immigrating islanders is the suburban areas of all the Australian major cities. Most settle in the cities outer suburbs and generally end up forming a loose knit community. It is important to note the island traditions and village hierarchy is transferred into the new country.

Social patterns
The sporting pastime of most of these Island nations is rugby union and so it is natural that these new immigrants will seek out local clubs and schools that play the game. The physical nature of the game attracts them to play. Families often have several children of varying ages that are only to keen to get involved with rugby. Island families are strong and often vocal supporters / spectators of their children in youth rugby. Emotions on the sideline can run strong during games but generally tends subside quickly after the event. It is important to note that the apparently passive Island temperament in some cases is short of tolerance. Therefore tempers can rise quickly. Direct confrontation is a usual result. Often it is an unfortunate by product of culture clashes, mostly due to a lack of respect and common sense from both parties. However the Islander when calmed down emotionally, will most likely be genuinely apologetic for his or her actions. One being astute and understanding this characteristic can often help dissipate an imminent problem well before it turns ugly. Having coached at a club for 11 years with a predominantly Polynesian Island membership I have born witness to many such instances. Being of part Islander denomination myself, I sometimes feel I to have inherited some of these characteristics.
As rugby can be a very social sport in the islands with males of all ages wanting to impress the spectators with actions of bravado and individual brilliance the transition to the team game can be difficult for some. These games, in the islands are often played with relaxed interpretations on the laws. The island communities tend to pride themselves on the physical way their races play the game, often praising the heroics of the individual. It is an expectation of the spectators to see a free flowing and physical game. The bigger the tackle the more the applause is often the case. “Tackle him” is a common phrase that can be heard amongst Polynesian spectators. This south sea island perception of how the game should be played, can be very difficult for coaches in this country to tame if the style is well entrenched into prospective players. This in turn also has a negative effect on impressionable island youth who often want to emulate these feats of individualism.

Culture
Polynesian Islanders in Australia are often mistaken for New Zealand Maori. There are major cultural differences between the nations even though both are Polynesian. The Maori culture has had nearly 2 centuries of integration with European culture. Their origins and cultural heritage is still prevalent and is blended into every day life within New Zealand. The Maori culture, art and history is a major tourism and export item for the nation. The spoken language is English and education system is on par with Australia. New Zealand has been and still is a dominant rugby nation where the game is viewed as the peoples game. This fashioned success was partly due to the merging of the two cultures. The Polynesian Maori aggression was possibly assimilated into the game style New Zealand has developed. It is interesting to note that many of New Zealand’s current super 12 teams are devoid of high numbers of pure maori players and there is an ever increasing presence of islanders. The increasing number of island players within New Zealand’s NPC is currently sparking hot debate on their eligibility to play in the competition if they are ineligible for All Black selection. Ineligible player numbers have now been limited in that competition.
Polynesian Islanders should not be compared with the New Zealand Maori. Islanders on the other hand have had substantially less integration with European culture in comparison. Their native culture is more predominant in the homeland partly due to isolation in the pacific. It should be noted that Samoa was virtually governed by the New Zealand (NZ government administration) for nearly 50 years in the middle part of the last century. This helps explain the strong rugby culture and immigration policy. Tourism is the major industry in the islands. This detachment to the rest of the world has led to an independent culture with it’s own interpretations on common law and religion.
The Island way is a little less focused on wealth creation and lasting personal prosperity and more focused on family life and living for today. Individual status is important and dealing with humiliation is often very difficult for these people. Village life in the Islands places the family unit in the highest priority with parents or grandparents (elders) as the figure heads, bearing in mind that most Polynesian cultures are formed by a myriad of chieftainships within their individual kingdoms. The Island lifestyle is in total contrast to the general way of life in Australia. Islanders that live in this country generally try to blend with the rest of society but nearly always retain most of their customs. This is evident in their homes decoration, furniture, floor coverings, clothing and regular staple diet. Religion is in most cases of highest importance within the culture. Strict rules on a youth’s religious education, often prevent him from participating in elite rugby programs particularly between the ages of 14 – 18. In terms of elite individuals, this is a most important period for player development and it is hard to regain the lost ground.

**Education levels**

Nearly all Australian or New Zealand born Islanders are reasonably well educated where as most early teen youth directly from the Islands have markedly different education levels to Australian standards. Polynesian IQ levels are generally equivalent to other races at a similar age similar age based on relevant subject matter, therefore intellectual knowledge is vastly different due to the culture differences. Most islanders speak their native tongue fluently and spoken English is usually a second language within the home. It is always an advantage to possess bilingual ability and this of course is an advantage for Polynesians on a rugby field. In some instances the family will not support their children in continuation with higher education. Island youth has a reasonably high dropout rate after year 11, often for reasons that will reduce their burden on the family unit. An increasing number of today’s Island students are going on to complete a tertiary education and are holding down professional jobs and this reflect the adjustment to western ideals. This trend is increasing as they assume the western culture and lifestyle and discard the old ways.

**Skill level, physical attributes and diet**

It is the drive to achieve individual heroism that makes the Polynesian youth player such an exciting prospect from a coaching point of view. The Island youth from a very young age is often trying to impress his piers. It is not uncommon to see a child of 3 years or less holding a rugby ball, trying to kick and chase. They even display signs of a strong competitive nature at this age. The early development of motor skills is a definite advantage as these kids grow up. As they reach the ages of 8 to 11 they are often fearless and show good potential, often performing at levels well above their age. It is also at this age group that there is some concern about legitimate age identification. We have all witnessed from time to time some very large lads for their specific age group.

At ages 12 through 16 their physical development is often well advanced on their Caucasian counterpart. Polynesian Islanders are often physically large for age group with solid bone structure and reasonable muscular development. The biggest advantage Islanders have in youth rugby is a psychological advantage that is evident in their no fear approach to the contact side of the game. The psychological advantage is built around a notion of self awareness, that they are ‘better than their opponent’. There is often little or no need for a pre game ‘fire up’ for an Islander as this is already built in and can be switched on and off almost at will. On the down side, the fact that they play with so much passion is also what can effect their emotions when things are going wrong. This of course can lead to acts of ill discipline at times.

This combination of size, psychology, strength and physical presence can be a tremendous advantage during these early years. This advanced development combined with their aggressive approach to the game can bring an element of fear to the opposition, especially Caucasian youth who are not yet mentally equipped to counter these tactics. We should always remember that there can be an element of danger in a game where there is a total mismatch of physical size and skill level / development. To this end coaches should always consider safety first and foremost and if possible / necessary find ways to de-power such mismatches. On the other hand, when on the receiving end, coaches should be looking at tactics to counter size advantage. In particular teaching their players techniques to counter any disadvantages they may have due to size mismatch, especially in the areas of defense, tackle techniques. Also in attack where evasion and avoiding contact is a requirement.

With all this talk of aggression a question must be raised. How much damage is caused to youth rugby by this dominance, particularly in the minor Australian rugby states? This is where there is a high percentage of Polynesian youth players spread throughout sub standard club competitions. Their numbers often make up more than half of a team. This is where the mismatch can have the worst consequences. It is possible that Caucasian youth with potential are possibly being put off the game because they are not as competitive or because they simply don’t enjoy getting hurt.

A large problem that plagues Islanders with elite rugby potential is weight problems. Their traditional staple foods are high in fat and carbohydrates. Their society is partly based around community feasting and there is not so much emphasis on a healthy food intake. Their children, just as all in this society, are often supplemented with the convenient fast foods. Island players that are recognized with potential need to be educated in healthy eating practices from a young age.

It is commonly recognized that there is an equalization of the physical strength and psychological levels between Island and Caucasian youth at a late teen stage. The speed of the equalization is dramatic with Caucasians often out performing their island counterparts in areas they were previously in deficit. This will often occur within a 3 year period and usually before the age of 20. Most visible change is in stamina. The Islanders inability to continually perform at high intensity for longer periods of time during a game becomes very evident even when they are relatively
fit. A sharp drop in performance late in each half is the usual symptom. This could be partly due to their diet. This physical anomaly often prevents Polynesian elite youth from achieving their ultimate dreams at representative rugby. The point is that at an earlier age there is a high proportion of Islanders that show elite potential but the dropout rate is dramatic by the end of the teen years. A presumption maybe that it is the loss of the psychological advantage that effects an Islander the most. A solution may be to refocus the athlete’s psychological perceptions during the late teen years. Of course there has been many examples of elite Polynesian players in New Zealand, Australian and numerous other rugby teams around the world over the years, but there could potentially have been many more.

**Comparisons**

Language barriers can segregate Caucasians from Islanders. Often island youth within Australia, in the young teen age group adopt the American RAP or R&B style of cultures. This association with black American culture can determine dress sense and other related social habits including posture and body language. It is also reflected in the vocabulary. A uniquely Australian adaptation of the American speech mannerisms and even pronunciation is common. A much lower percentage of the Australian Caucasian youth follow these patterns and if so, then to a lesser degree. This can create divisions and segregate teams into groups of the ‘cool’ and ‘not so cool’. It is therefore necessary as a coach to identify and stamp out any team divisions early in the season / program.

Elite Caucasian players will often develop evasion skills to counter the Polynesians robust defensive tactics. This skill which is honed during the younger years can be a decisive advantage when the physical gap is bridged at the late teen age. This should be encouraged from an early age to assist with agility and guile.

Some Island youth tend to lack discipline if not kept in check. Issues like consistent high tackles, which are commonly a discipline matter are mostly the result of over intensive play.

**General Observations**

Coaches must recognize players with language difficulties. Comprehension suffers substantially when the level of spoken English is substandard. It is obvious that Islanders can excel if taught correctly, therefore total comprehension of what is being taught is of utmost importance. Also attention span can be limited, as they like to get involved in the activity. This area can be quantified by seeking constant feedback from players identified with language or comprehension difficulties. At representative levels, where Islanders are concerned, coaches must be able to recognize a players true character and decide if the situation is workable well before selection into the team. An understanding of an Islanders individual social upbringing can help. Things to look for are families where the father is / was a high level player or even where older siblings are / were elite players. There is a good chance that the sons or younger brothers will try to emulate and surpass the feats of the preceding playing family members. This cannot be used as a complete judge of character due to individuality. But, as a rule of thumb, when the immediate family, value the institution of rugby, then the child will be encouraged to learn the correct techniques. At representative selection feedback from prior coaches is handy. Absenteeism is often a sign that the family is not supporting the player and the reasons given for poor attendance can often be obscure, hiding the truth. It sometimes pays to look behind the excuses, to seek the truth. Island players may be influenced by family members in areas that may be contrary to a coach’s requirements. This can be problematic with players showing elite potential not to mention frustrating for a coach. Family bonds can be very strong and a players actions can be influenced at any time, even during a game with instructions being shouted from the sidelines in their native tongue. Players must be taught to ignore all outside influences. Emphasize that we play what we train.

Coaches must be able to persist with minor behavioral problems. Some Island players have what can be almost be perceived as an arrogant persona. This is often just a front and a much more pleasant character lays behind the rough exterior. Their integrity is nearly always genuine and honesty is comparative to any other race.

Winning is a high priority for the Polynesian Island player and losing can almost be classed as a loss of face in this society. Therefore sometimes pressure situations can effect the emotional stability of the player. Their rugby upbringing is the major factor in determining their psychological reasoning during a game. Their upbringing means having played quality rugby with quality coaches from a young age regardless of where they were born and therefore a greater ability to control emotional outbursts. A Polynesian players psychological stability needs to be established at an early stage by the coach. Teaching all players to deal with emotional responses associated with winning, losing and high pressure situations is the coaches responsibility. At elite levels identify those with a tendency for ill discipline and make a decision that is best for the team regardless of the individuals ability.

Keep their attention span by keeping their mind and body stimulated. Design sessions to involve as much activity as possible. Because of their physical nature, Islanders love the physical contact involved in this game. As we aim to teach running at ‘shoulders and not sternums’ we must train them to avoid contact where possible or at least consider the option of driving past the man rather than into the man. This can be and must be encouraged from a young age for once the physical ‘man to man’ game is entrenched in the thought patterns of an Islander it is virtually impossible to change.

Always encourage the Islanders to mix with their Caucasian team mates and discourage the clicks or groups that often form when there are a number of them in a team. A players immediate friends or associates outside the rugby team should noted if possible as they can influence behavioral patterns. Encourage group participation as islanders may tend
to stand back and let others lead the way in group discussions. Islanders do tend to distance themselves from a group when in minority. Watch for segregation of the team. Sometimes the clicks of players can operate as team within the team. It is most obvious when the majority of play is either created or carried out by the inner group. This is more evident at the U12 through U15 age groups where physical domination can prevail, but it can cause rifts within teams at all age groups. Stipulate a requirement of full team participation.

Matters of finance can be a strain. Must be monitored constantly and dealt with firmly. Most Island families are able to finance tour costs on a time payment basis, but consideration should be made to those with multiple children in representative sides.

**Tips to coaching Polynesian Island youth**

- Set ground rules and set high expectations, they will respond. They need to know your expectations from them.
- A strict rigid regime will often earn the coach respect, not only from the player but the parents as well.
- Parental support will appear to be non existent, don’t believe it. It may be for you or against you.
- Do some homework on the players background and family.
- Make sessions meaningful and intensive but make sure they comprehend the session topic.
- Utilize relevant grid games as this feeds their competitive needs.
- Tight discipline required to keep them on their toes.
- A general rule is train them hard and they will respect you for it.
- They are often low intensity fitness trainers but high intensity players. Work on it.
- Watch for drop off patterns during fitness sessions. Encourage PB’s.
- Keep the oratory content simplified and seek constant feedback to check comprehension.
- Seek feedback from individuals from the group in front of the group to add feeling of participation.
- Never try to make an individual mechanical if he is not. An individuals flair should enhanced not diminished.
- Encourage players to offer a continuous level of play rather than peaks of high and low involvement.
- Cover the basics and take notes as they may never have been taught them before.
- Utilize their strengths as individuals in plays that advance the teams efforts.
- Offer individuals advise on relevant coaching matters, unfortunately it may never have been given before.
- Monitor all forms of injuries as it is common for nothing to be done about them.

**Conclusion**

It is not my intention to categorize Island players into the risky set. History has shown that many Island players are more than capable of making the grade. This paper’s main focus is on issues involving Polynesian Island youth players who show elite potential. Coaches must understand that players that have been exposed to the Australian and New Zealand rugby systems from an early age are most likely to have a more suitable approach to the game by our standards. But there is also a large amount of players (newer arrivals) directly from the Islands and it’s within this category that there is some enormous potential.

To gain a better understanding of Island players and the key elements of their approach to the game of rugby, one should watch a game or two between two 100% Island sides. Inter Island games are a regular occurrence at Polynesian festivals in this country and are held in all states annually. Here one can see how they enjoy the physical elements of the game. Also displayed is an expansive game with great individual running skills, ball handling and aggression that provides spectators with a true spectacle. From this, an astute coach could gain an insight into how cultural differences can shape the rugby playing Polynesian Islander.

Islanders can make excellent rugby players at an elite level. Their physical presence and aggressive psychological approach to the game can be a very big advantage for a team provided it’s all channeled into a disciplined package.