

A background image of rugby players in action, overlaid with a semi-transparent green filter. The players are wearing various jerseys, some with 'Gilbert' and 'K SPORT' visible. They are holding rugby balls and appear to be in a scrum or ruck.

The Rugby League Coach Education Programme

The Think Coaching E-Link

Issue 01

Welcome

Welcome to the first issue of the Rugby League Coach Education programmes fortnightly newsletter "Think Coaching E-Link. This new venture we feel is another exciting vehicle for disseminating information to the game and a forum to offer coaches the opportunity to debate and discuss issues around the important subject of Coach Development.

Coach Development has been identified as a priority across all British sport, and to facilitate this the Rugby Football League now have a full time officer charged with putting in place structures and systems that assist coaches within the game to further develop themselves. The strategy for coach development has of a number of facets. Amongst these are the National Coaching Conference, Think Coaching Rugby League Profiling, STEPs initiative along with this regular e-zine. Below are brief descriptions depicting these programmes and details of how they can be accessed.

It's an exciting time to be coaching Rugby League. Never before have such opportunities existed for coaches I hope very much that you will take advantage develop yourself and become – THE BEST THAT YOU CAN BE.

Ray Unsworth
Director of Coach Education

National Coaching Conference

Held in 2003 and 2004 at Bolton Arena with over four hundred coaches in attendance. Keynote speakers have included Bill Sweenenham (Performance Director for Swimming) and Wayne Bennett (Australia Head Coach). A total of twenty different workshops have been delivered on a variety of subjects including Sports Science, Sports Medicine along with game specific material. The next Conference is scheduled for November 2006.

What is the Think Coaching Rugby League Profiling Pack?

This tool is designed to help coaches identify their training needs. The document consists of a profiling matrix and questionnaire. Once completed the coach uses the moderation document to confirm and justify his or her responses. Ideally this would be done with a mentor, and from this an action plan can be developed and the coach directed to where his or her needs can be met via the STEP initiative.

What is STEPs

The Rugby League STEPs initiative has been designed to facilitate the development of coaches within the United Kingdom. It consists of sports specific and generic modules that are applicable to a coaches development at the level of the game in which they currently operate.

The STEP brochure carries information on what is available and how it can be accessed to aid your development. What is detailed in the brochure is by no means an exhaustive list, modules are being added all the time that are both sports specific and generic. As a subscriber to this E-zine you will be kept up to date with all developments of the programme.

ARTICLE 1

DEVELOPING A COACHING PHILOSOPHY

Where should our focus be?

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There are many factors that motivate players to play rugby league. Some players play for enjoyment, while others simply enjoy the camaraderie of competing alongside their peers. Equally, coaches can also be motivated by many factors. The knowledge that they are contributing to the development of an athlete, or indeed the overall growth of a person, is often sufficient incentive for some coaches to first become involved in coaching. However, all players and coaches, at least at the senior level, share one common motivating factor - a strong desire to win. Whether a coach is motivated by winning or the pure enjoyment of the game, the development of a coaching philosophy is necessary to clarify one's coaching objectives.

- The development of a successful coaching philosophy is governed by one's own experiences
- The knowledge one gathers.
- One's vision for the future.

When developing a coaching philosophy, possible questions that should be asked are:

- What do we, as a team or club need to STOP doing?
- What do we, as a team or club need to KEEP doing?
- What do we, as a team or club need to START doing?

The purpose of this article is to discuss some factors that require consideration when developing a coaching philosophy.

Developing Players vs Winning a Premiership

It may be argued that winning competitions is the 'true' measure of performance. While most coaches are motivated (at least to some extent) by winning, only one club can win the premiership each season. Does this mean that the remaining clubs in the competition have failed? If winning the premiership is the club's only measure of performance, then the answer is 'yes'. However, the flipside to winning a premiership is player development. In fact, many coaches openly state the reason for poor performances (as estimated from their position on the premiership ladder) is due to rebuilding of the club, or player development. One National Rugby League coach acknowledged early in the 2002 season that his team was unlikely to win the 2002 premiership. However, the same coach also stated that the 2002 season offered an important learning opportunity for his young team to gain valuable first grade experience. The coach continued by stating that the exposure of his team to just one finals match would provide an important platform necessary for playing success in future seasons. The irony of player development is that if clubs manage to

secure the services of players long enough and develop them appropriately, their team develops continuity and their chances of winning a premiership increase dramatically. For several years, country rugby league clubs have attempted to 'buy' premierships, by paying exorbitant amounts of money for high profile players. Quite often, the process is successful, with most clubs winning a premiership within the first three years of the initial financial outlay.

However, the negative consequences of this process far outweigh the benefits, with most clubs struggling to compete financially and professionally with opposition clubs on a long-term basis. Perhaps more importantly is the lack of consideration given to junior players already competing at the club. Many junior players progress through the junior ranks idolising the senior players of their club. The major realistic incentive for most of these players is to play first grade for the club where they have spent their entire junior playing career. By 'purchasing' high profile players, administrators are sending a clear message to junior players that there is no clear pathway for progression at the club. Clearly, if a club is to objectively gauge the team performance, then premierships or finals appearances can not be the sole performance measure.

Tradition vs Innovation

While the game of rugby league is constantly evolving, and the level of athleticism has improved considerably, the core skills and physical qualities required by players have not altered significantly over time. Like the great players of the past, rugby league players still require high levels of muscular and aerobic power, speed, strength, and agility. The ability to dominate the ruck, make one-on-one tackles, and offload under pressure are skills that are required of successful players, both past and present. If the game has maintained much of the appeal that it held fifty years ago, can coaches expect to coach the same way that successful coaches have done before them? Clearly, the answer is 'no'.

Technological advances (allowing sophisticated computer analysis of a players' strengths and weaknesses) and the advent of full-time professionalism are just two examples of how coaching, and indeed, the entire coaching process has evolved. These developments, coupled with strong junior development programs, has ensured that greater time and resources are devoted to the 'fine-tuning' of players skills, rather than the 'learning' of skills. However, just because the coaching process is now more sophisticated, does this mean that coaches need to 'reinvent the wheel' entirely? Once again, the answer is 'no'. It is very easy for the modern-day coach to criticise past coaching methods as archaic. Just as coaches need to justify the reason for implementing a new training drill or game, justification should be provided for eliminating an 'archaic' activity entirely. On the other hand, coaches are to a large extent responsible for the way the game is played, both now and in the future. There is no argument that the players are the most important people involved in the game. After all, the players are the entertainers, they are the people demonstrating the skill and taking the physical collisions each week. However, while successful players have developed many of the core skills required to compete at the highest level, the coach plays a significant role in improving those skills. In addition, the coach is charged with the *power* to determine the way the game is to be played now, but perhaps more importantly has the *vision* to determine the way the game is to be played in the future. With this in mind, coaches should be encouraged to take *risks*, be *innovative*, be *creative*, and *experiment* in order to test the limits of player performance.

An Autocratic vs Empowering Coaching Philosophy

“Players will rise to the challenge if it is their challenge”, is a quote used by Wayne Smith, a previous coach of the Canterbury Crusaders Super 12 rugby team. Significantly, the Canterbury Crusaders won successive Super 12 campaigns under the coaching leadership of Wayne Smith. The success of the New Zealand Warriors has largely been attributed to the coaching prowess of Daniel Anderson. Anderson has embraced an empowering coaching style by allowing his players to develop their own strategies to combat opposition teams (See Rugby League Coaching Manuals, Book 23). By advocating this approach, Anderson has given his players ownership of their successes. Perhaps more importantly, an empowering coaching philosophy allows players to develop decision-making and problem-solving skills. These skills are unlikely to be developed in players who are coached under an autocratic coaching style. In fact, coaches who dictate to players or provide all of the answers to playing problems, may be inadvertently disempowering players. At the very least, players are being robbed of an opportunity to develop decision-making and problem-solving skills. An empowering coaching philosophy does not absolve the coach from performing his coaching duties.

Indeed, each player invariably will require some direction and guidance during the course of a season. In addition, an empowering coaching philosophy does not prevent the coach from implementing boundaries and structure within the team. However, if a coach is to select a team of players to perform a task based on their skill and ability to complete that task, then the coach should allow the players the opportunity to decide the best option/s for success.

Summary

Whether a beginner or experienced coach, the development of a coaching philosophy is necessary to clarify one's coaching objectives. A coaching philosophy is a set of guidelines or principles that govern the way one coaches. However, a coaching philosophy does not need to be set in stone, and may alter over time as one's experience in the game, knowledge of the game, and visions for the future of the game evolve.



ARTICLE 2

Hey Coach!

Do you have a coaching philosophy?

Written by Gary Roberts

The Oxford Dictionary defines the word *philosophy* as:

'Seeking after wisdom or knowledge, esp. that which deals with ultimate reality or with the most general causes and principles of things and ideas and human perception and knowledge of them.'

Roget's Thesaurus says of *philosophy*:

Knowledge, laws, thought, wisdom, learning, theory, principles, metaphysics, science, ideology, doctrine, system, lifestyles, values and tenets.

Coaches are often asked to explain their coaching philosophy. Some go to great lengths and give an articulate answer. Others work their way through the question and stumble along looking for an answer. The question is complex and many different answers are received and taking into account the various definitions, it is easy to understand why.

Maybe a simpler question would be, "Why do you want to be a coach?" or "What do you hope to achieve with your coaching?" If you are going to be a coach and it does not matter at what level you are coaching, whether it is mini-mod, junior level, senior team, representative or the elite teams, you need a framework and parameters or a coaching philosophy to work to. This philosophy will make you challenge yourself and will set you apart from other coaches.

Before we go much further, jot down some issues, guidelines or key thoughts that you work to as a coach. If you are a junior coach, it might be, 'How important is winning?' or 'Equalising the opportunity to play'. Think about it and do write something down. Be aware that this is not your philosophy, as that will take time to develop. You have written some topics that are your key thoughts and they give you some tools to work with. The thinking coach can now begin to implement procedures that require outcomes. A philosophy will help you grow in the game and watch the players that have come in contact with you develop because you have a philosophy of how you want them to develop.

Greg Pierce, assistant coach at Cronulla Sharks with Chris Anderson, gave coaches an interesting insight into his philosophies in a talk at the recent 2003 High Performance Camp at Narrabeen. He began with the statement, "We all have a philosophy on coaching. You may not think it but we all have thoughts on how the game should be played." Pierce is correct in his assumption that we have thoughts on the way the game is played but these are not to be confused with the styles of play that a particular team uses.

Wayne Bennett, Broncos' coach, has a simple plan of the way he wants his teams to play. In 2003 he wants more running and passing to come back into the Broncos game - a trait that made them successful in the mid 90s. Chris Anderson, Cronulla coach, has a

style of play, developed while he was coaching at Halifax, that involves a flat attack. He has won premierships at Canterbury and Melbourne with game plans derived from this attacking system. The Sydney Roosters play it completely differently from Brisbane and Cronulla. Coach Stuart's game plan in 2002 was based on effective defence in the opposition's half. Daniel Anderson's NZ Warriors mode of play includes creating offloads from his big forwards – again different from the other coaches.

All the above are STYLES of play and are not to be confused with a coach's philosophy of the game. Once a coaching philosophy on the game is developed, a thinking coach is born. Along the way, a coach will have doubts and doubters will question him about his philosophy. Remember the fans wanted Wayne Bennett's head early in his career at the Broncos but he stuck with his principles. Bennett acknowledges he has made adjustments to the way the Broncos play in attack and defence and has had to make hard decisions about playing personnel. It could be argued that those decisions are a part of Bennett's coaching philosophy of the game. One of Bennett's major philosophies of coaching is to having players performing the fundamental skills correctly and to improve these skills in his players. It involves drills and small-sided games - a coaching philosophy since his days as a rookie coach. The drills and training games may have changed and his emphasis on skill development has evolved in different ways. However, his coaching philosophy of constantly improving the fundamentals has remained the same throughout his coaching career. He said, "The things that haven't changed over the years are my values and philosophies in the way I believe football should be played."

Greg Pierce says, "Everyone's philosophies will be different but no one person's philosophies are going to be wrong. Your thoughts may be the total opposite of another coach but that does not mean that you are wrong or they are right. He concludes, "That is why rugby league is a great game. It can be played in so many different ways.

Hopefully, you have written down some thoughts that may start you on the way to developing your own coaching philosophy. You are now a thinking coach with a philosophy on the game of rugby league. Work within its boundaries. Maybe move sideways occasionally but don't move too far away from the things that you hold true – YOUR COACHING PHILOSOPHY.

Both these articles appeared originally in the Rugby League Coaching Magazine and are produced here for educational purposes only by their kind permission.

The Rugby League Coaching Magazine website - <http://www.rlcm.com.au/home.htm>

What are your thoughts about the articles in this issue?

What is your coaching Philosophy?

Why not write an article to be included in a future issue?

Drop us a line at haydn.walker@rfl.uk.com

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