

The U21IRB World Cup, Scotland 2004.

Coaching In The Competition Phase - Is It Just About Winning?

by
Jon Callard

Coach to the England U21s 2002 -2004



Shoulder to shoulder, stand the GRAND SLAM WINNERS

This age group has surpassed all expectation this season by completing a clean sweep in the U21 Six Nations Championship. It is the first time ever that England U21s has won the Grand slam *and* the Triple Crown. Twelve months of extremely hard work and careful planning has paid off!

That was the Six Nations, though, and what might seem ideal for a competitive programme over six weeks, may not be suitable for a World Cup competition that features the best teams in the world at this age group. This demands a playing schedule of five games in twenty one days with only twenty six players to choose from. It is probably the most gruelling competition that either a player or a coach can enter in to, but it does provide a wonderful opportunity for development.

The senior 'A' team fixture list is all but gone and many nations debate whether to restore it for competitive development reasons. Whilst that debate takes place, the U21 age group has to be the shop window for future international recognition. Couple this with the most demanding playing structure and the minimum of personnel to pick from and the coach has a serious job! *'It is about growing strawberries that the senior side can make jam out of'*.

What did stand us in good stead for the Six Nations competition were clear principles that were cast in stone. These related to the way we wanted to play and they were:

A fast game that involved running into the space with pace; attacking shoulders and the half holes that defenders would leave; the ability to offer offloads out of the contact area and the running of gamble lines.

Much of the training sessions would be based around these principles and the game plan evolved and was concocted accordingly. There was also a strong emphasis on set piece play and the implications it offered us to play to our principles.

These principles were adopted for the World Cup and recorded from both matches and training and placed on a DVD. This DVD would then act as our 'game plan booklet'. Players had a clear visual of the principles working in the competitive situation and would know how/ when to adopt them.

Hence, much of the planning and preparation had been done and the players and coaches could be confident that a sound game plan had been laid as a foundation for the next twenty one days. This is vital, because, you do not have masses of time to spend on the training park putting game plans in place and developing elaborate strike moves. The physical demands on the players will not allow this! The guideline for a coach in this situation is to focus on the principles and get the maximum amount of rest between games.



One of the few team training sessions

As a coaching group, we would keep the training park requirements as a team to a minimum, but would make up time for development in ‘other areas,’ areas that I will touch upon later. Do note, though, that the players were fully up to speed with the game plan and did not need to run through the whole range of plays every day. Only once prior to a match did we run as a team and that was in the ‘captain’s run’ the day before. This was a twenty minute training run led by the captain. As a coach, I would sometimes intervene and stipulate to the players that they would have to conduct the whole practice using a soccer ball or run the whole sequence of plays without any ball at all. The objective was to stimulate the minds of the players and keep them mentally sharp.

Hopefully, you can see a programme taking shape and the relevance it has to both the playing side and the development side of this group of players.

Coupled with a playing programme for the players was a proper recovery and rest programme. This involved strict hot and cold regimes after games and an active rehabilitation session the morning after a match. The active rehab was a lively thirty minute spinning session on a bike or a twenty minute ‘plunge and stretch’ in the pool.

The development of these players is not just about the playing side of the game, but educating them to look after themselves before and after competition.

I mentioned ‘the other areas’ earlier, often they are the areas that are neglected in competition. This is the time set aside for the players to work on their game, both on and off the field. Some of the most rewarding sessions I have had as a coach are the small sessions with two or three players working on their own game. The field work would be based around individual skills that were situational and the classroom work would be based around decision-making and game understanding. An example of this would be the role of the centre in the team’s kicking game strategy. Field work was primarily the technique execution and the classroom was about when and where the player had the opportunity.



Bradley Davis working on his game.

We found as coaches that the players gained enormously out of the interaction, that their individual skills could be developed and that they were being prepared for challenges ahead of them that were going to be more demanding.

With the use of ‘Smart Board’ technology, the software programmes of ‘Silicon Coach’ and ‘Game Planner,’ the coaches could offer the development programme that would enable learning and discovery to take place.

Even though we did not win this years World Cup (finished fifth, having lost just one game against the eventual champions, New Zealand), 84% of the players had felt that the experience had helped them develop their game. With this in mind and the belief in the ripening of strawberries, does the winning at this level really matter?