

## ELITE PLAYER DEVELOPMENT CENTRES (EPDCs).

*At the Academy Managers' meeting at Leeds Rhinos' (England) Academy on Oct 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004, **Stuart Lancaster**, the Leeds Academy Manager, suggested that our current national academy structure may not best suit the game in its current guise. He suggested that there is probably a need to prepare players for the Premiership before they reach the age of nineteen; it does happen but it is the exception rather than the rule. He put forward his strong belief that there is a strong requirement in the game to reduce the age of identification of talent.*

*He put forward the resounding success story of the Leeds Rhinos' Rugby League Academy as a system that identifies player talent at a far earlier stage than in rugby union **and** taps into other resources that may not at first be the traditional ones that rugby has looked at.*

*His example is of what is possible and what has been achieved at the Leeds Rhinos' Rugby League Academy – and begged the question of: 'should not we be doing something similar? In the Grand Final 2004, no fewer than thirteen of the Leeds' squad had come through their own academy. And that is one academy in one city!*

*He offered an insight into how the Rhinos' Academy works and simply asked the question, "Could the Rugby Union Academy system learn anything from the Leeds Rhinos' structure, aims and objectives?"*

*The Leeds Rhinos' scholarship programme is overseen by **Peter Todd** and he explained how their Academy works.*

## LEEDS RHINOS ACADEMY.

### AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE SCHOLARSHIP.

- To improve participation in rugby league in Leeds.
- To develop people.
- To develop athletes.
- Education.
- A sense of belonging to the club.
- To provide quality players (of Super League standard) to the 1<sup>st</sup> team.

### SCHOLARSHIP SCHEME DETAILS.

- There is a Manager, Bob Pickles, who oversees various coaches in designated 'service areas' of the city.

- The academy goes from U13 to U16 and there are up to twelve boys in each age group. The spaces, however, are not automatically filled; the players must show enough promise to merit a place.
- The players work at the club once or twice a week and the 15 – 16 age group definitely has two sessions per week. (Compare this to the RU system where the equivalent players may be seen once a month!)
- The work is monitored by school, parents and the club scheme. Reports are common so that all concerned are kept fully informed on progress- *especially* in attitude.
- The education components deal with psychology, physiology, life skills, injury prevention, strength and conditioning and rugby league skills.
- When players are sixteen, much is known about them as players as well as people.

### **RHINOS ACADEMY VISION.**

- **To provide a successful squad of Super League players who have all progressed through our department by 2009.**

### **THE EDUCATION PROCESS WITH LEEDS RHINOS' APPRENTICES.**

- Players are involved in a scheme that is rapidly evolving where they spend five mornings a week on a BTEC National Certificate in Sport.
- Players coach in local schools for a day a week.
- Many coach handicapped players.
- There is voluntary labour in hospice gardens.
- 'A' level courses are available at a sixth form college but the club prefers the BTEC route, which could eventually lead to a foundation degree that could be gained on a part-time basis over four years rather than three.
- The players still live at home but when they reach the age of seventeen to eighteen, a club house becomes available.
- A future aim is to try to get a university hall of residence as the main accommodation.
- By a player's eighteenth birthday, the club knows who is good enough. (RU is just starting to get players by this stage!).
- The scholarship is renewed annually. If a player is deemed not to be up to what is expected, his scholarship is not renewed.

*Alongside the academic structure there is a Leeds Rhinos' conditioning philosophy, which was explained by Andreas Liefeth. He works under the Head Conditioner, Steve Walsh.*

## **LEEDS RHINOS CONDITIONING PHILOSOPHY.**

### **INTRODUCTION.**

- The academy structure at Leeds Rhinos is a shining example of how the investment in a professional structure in sport can reap rich rewards for both the club and for the sport in general.
- This investment has led to a crop of home-grown talent that has been nurtured at Leeds and has provided a supply of top-level performers.
- Our conditioning programme aims to progressively prepare the academy player for entry into open-age rugby.
- It does this by applying ‘classic’ training principles in a specific and ‘real’ manner.

### **SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMME.**

- There are three scholarship teams, U13, U14 and U15, drawn from local rugby league clubs in the Leeds and adjoining areas.
- This programme is partly supported by the Rugby Football League.

### **SCHOLARSHIP CONDITIONING.**

- The conditioning theme is the development of an aerobic base.
- Basic tests are performed throughout the players’ formative rugby years. Body composition, as well as aerobic development, is monitored.
- At this stage there is no attempt to develop any anaerobic capabilities.
- These squads provide a supply of players with a conditioned background that is appropriate for the academy structure.

### **ACADEMY STRUCTURE.**

#### **UNDER 16s (FOUNDATION ACADEMY.)**

- Using the foundation of the aerobic base that is created in the scholarship, we develop a further foundation of muscular endurance. This facilitates the power training that comes later.
- Technical aspects are introduced through the Olympic lifts to develop neural co-ordination.
- Aerobic, muscular and speed/endurance exercises further develop essential performance criteria.
- At the end of this period our aim is to have compounded the physical abilities that the young players have already gained, as well as building a bridge to the physical abilities developed in the next stage.

### **UNDER 18s (JUNIOR ACADEMY.)**

- This is when we begin to develop power and technical competence.
- In this period we aspire to use a range of co-ordinated power exercises to enhance the platform created in the previous year.
- We expect that this will be a very productive period that shows significant power gains. Particular attention is paid to technique and form.

### **UNDER 21s (SENIOR ACADEMY.)**

- The fruition of the earlier years pays dividends when mature athletes again compound physical developments.
- We expect continued development in power gains, along with strength gains linked to their physical maturity.

### **MERGING OF THE LINES.**

- Although there are three distinct squads, there is potential for players to advance to older squads.
- This depends largely upon physical ability and player potential.

### **CONDITIONING – GENERAL POINTS.**

- An essential part of the training programme lies in the variety of exercise modes employed. Swimming, boxing and wrestling are regularly used.
- We utilise bespoke conditioning exercises for games players such as hamstring raises and back-hypers. As muscular endurance exercises they facilitate other speed and power work in the programme.

### **MONITORING AND TESTING.**

- A key aspect to any system is an ability to monitor and allow feedback.
- Performance measures are tracked throughout the players' careers and progression through the academy structure.
- These range from basic field tests (e.g. vertical jump) to bespoke tests (e.g. our own Leeds test) to laboratory-based testing (e.g. VO<sub>2</sub> Max. with identification of anaerobic threshold).

*Stuart then introduced Professor Carlton Cooke from the Leeds Metropolitan University, who is himself a parent of an EPDC athlete. His brief was to suggest to the academy managers that it is possible to work an integrated system between the academy and university, especially when potential links are opened up, for example, when students assist with the testing procedures. This applies to rugby league but could work just as well in the union structure.*

# THE INTEGRATION OF SPORTS SCIENCE WITH THE EPDC ATHLETES

by  
**PROFESSOR CARLTON COOKE,**

## WHY INTEGRATION?

- To support coaches, players and parents with
  1. Monitoring and evaluation
  2. Information, advice and education.

## MONITORING AND EVALUATION.

They help with:

- Selection and talent identification (both objective and subjective).
- Long-term athlete development.
- Collecting data, analysis, evaluation and storage.
- Growth and development. (e.g. height and weight.)
- Fitness + (over)training. (e.g. speed, agility and endurance.)
- Diet and lifestyle. (body composition, diaries.)
- Player profiling, choking, burnout, teamwork (with psychological support.)
- Podiatry and biomechanics (specific prevention and treatment).

The youngest players are monitored on sprints, height, weight and agility. The eldest are monitored on sprints, height, weight, agility, body composition, strength, power and endurance.

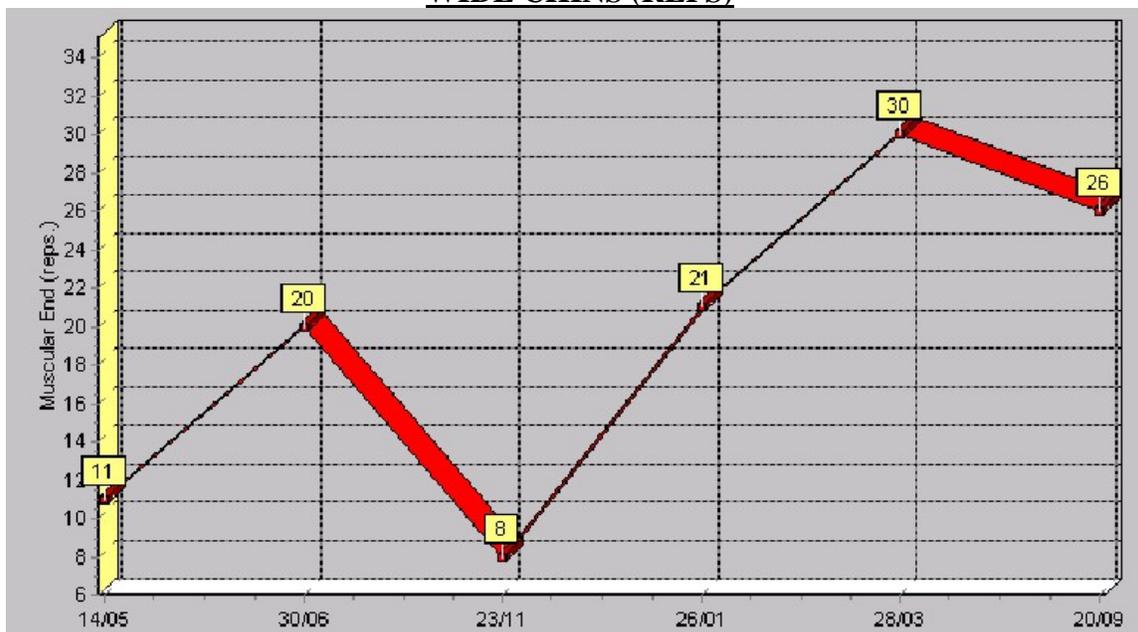
The screening ranges from the very simple to the complex and what happens depends on a player's age. It occurs once or twice a year and fits in with pre- and post-specific training. There is a cost and this varies from the cheapest when all are involved; this cost does increase when a specific individual needs attention.

The following example is of what can be done with the Leeds' approach. The personal profile is of Ashley Gibson (born 25/09/86), an eighteen year-old Leeds player (U18) who is also in the Great Britain squad. The graph of improvement is hugely impressive.

### WEIGHT (KG)



### WIDE CHINS (REPS)



*Stuart spoke again to summarise what had gone before and to stress the main thrust of his argument, asking the managers to consider our system after learning what happens at Leeds Rhinos Academy.*

### **AGE OF IDENTIFICATION OF TALENT.**

If we want to adapt Rugby Union's current structure, there are other avenues that we can explore to find talent – especially if the feeling is that we need to reduce the age of identification. There are potential options that we can get involved in.

- Closer integration with community programmes and RDO structures.
- 'Sell' the game to more games players who are playing another sport.
- Tap into the School Sports Co-ordinator programme.

### **THE PESSCL STRATEGY.**

**(THE PHYSICAL EDUCATION, SCHOOL SPORTS AND COMMUNITY LINKS NATIONAL STRATEGY.)**

- The PESSCL strategy was launched in October 2002 by the DfES and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The object is to promote and enhance the take-up of sporting opportunities by five to sixteen year olds.
- Over £1 billion is being invested by the Government (including £459 million to implement the strategy over three years from April 2003).
- Within this, a structure has been set up to deploy existing and additional staff within secondary schools.

### **IDENTIFICATION OF TALENT BY THE ACADEMY WITHIN THE PESSCL STRATEGY.**

- The Academy aids identification of talent in 'clusters' and 'families' of state schools.
- Rugby festivals are arranged and co-ordinated so that talent can be spotted.
- Specialist sports colleges are used to host and run talent identification inset courses to raise awareness of PE teachers who are not rugby specialists.
- The academy is continuing to use other areas for talent identification in addition to existing schools and clubs.
- They aim to decrease the age at which talent is identified.
  1. They will link to the *Schools Gifted and Talented Scheme*, which enables children to be identified as 'gifted and talented' as early as nine years old.

2. They will link to *Education Sport Action Zones*.
3. They will link to other 'general sport' community programmes.
4. Rugby's hat will be firmly thrown into the ring

**SUMMARY.** *This was Stuart Lancaster's mop-up and he tried to bring together what had been illustrated of just one Rugby League academy. His plea was that all the managers of our academies would digest and consider what they had heard, especially on the subject of when we start to identify talent.*

- Do we need to invest more time into the development of our talented thirteen to sixteen year olds?
- Do we know who they are?
- Can we change the current system? If yes, are we prepared to work to change it?
- Do we need to?
- Is controlling the environment the key?
- Can we utilise links with further and higher educational establishments and tap into their resources?
- Can young players relocate at sixteen?
- How can we expand the 'academy arm' to reach those who might not have tried the sport?
- Is any of this any use at all if there is no meaningful competition to play in?