

COACHING MINIS BY DANIEL SHEFRAS.

The author coaches the U13s at Aldershot Rugby Club and has been coaching for six years after starting with the U8s at Ealing and more recently the U13s at Camberley. He started coaching when his playing career was cut short by injury. He enjoyed his start with his son's age group and is currently awaiting assessment for his Level 2 coaching badge. He sees the squad of about thirty twice a week on Sunday from ten till twelve and Wednesday from six thirty till about eight.

The World Cup exposed rugby union to the masses resulting in an unprecedented deluge of new, young players aged 6+ arriving eager and raring to go at Sunday morning training sessions across the country. Many clubs can now boast squads numbering over forty and some even have waiting lists after capping the age groups. Fantastic as this is, many issues are raised when squad sizes are this big in games where the continuum allows for limited team sizes. Is it feasible for age groups to run 3-4 teams? How do you coach that many kids in a limited time frame on a Sunday morning? Do you have enough coaches qualified at the relevant level? The list of questions is endless but I suppose the most pressing one is: how do you manage to keep kids interested and focused for a session? I remember back to my younger playing days when the best players got the focus and the less able ones were left to fend for themselves. The coaching was limited and unprofessional, coaching qualifications were unheard of and skill drills were non-existent. How times have changed! There are numerous rugby websites, books and courses with endless reams of information about drills, skills and the nirvana of the coaching ideal - but very little is focused on the younger age groups. This means that the usually more inexperienced coaches at the lower end of the minis age groups have little reference point or information source to help guide sessions.

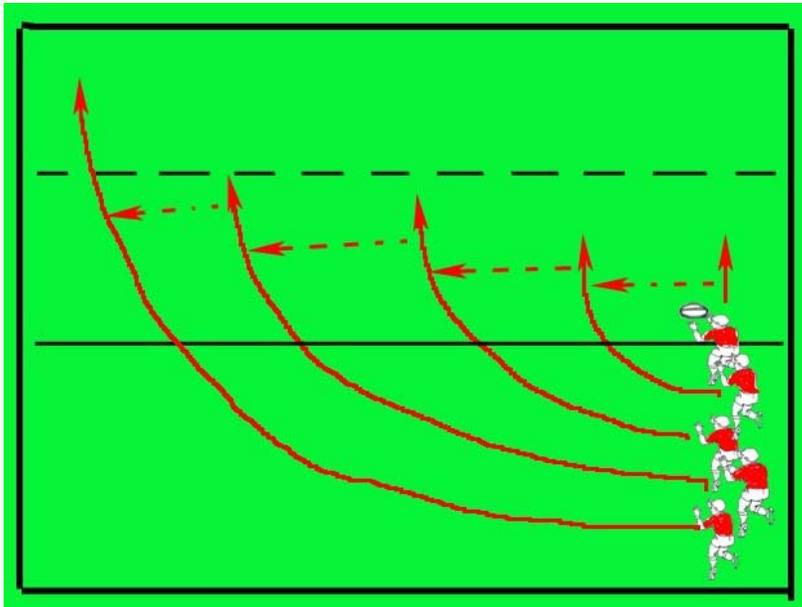
It is no longer possible for coaches to simply turn up on a Sunday morning and go with the flow. Head coaches now have a responsibility to plan sessions, ensure that the other assistant coaches are aware of the session plan and make sure that there is enough equipment available to run the different drills. Coaches also need to have back-up plans in case there are more or fewer players than expected or if a particular exercise doesn't work. Coaches have to ensure that the drills are fun but enlightening, that there is sufficient opportunity for individual focus, that they have the right set of drills to challenge all abilities from those naturals to those not so gifted.

So, what is the most important skill any child has to learn? The answer is simple – passing; from minis through to senior level it is the most important skill to learn and

use. It is also the skill where players spend the least amount of time practising in a controlled environment, as in drills or conditioned exercises. The continuum forces coaches to develop this skill during the transition from the non-contact Under 7s to the full contact game at Under 9s. However, once the tackle comes into play many coaches forget about reinforcing the basics of the passing game and focus on what happens at the breakdown, with rucking and mauling etc., rather than looking to avoid the contact and play to the open space.

It is important to know when and why we pass the ball. This, I believe, is a concept that is foreign to many players and many coaches. If you ask any player why they pass the ball, most will be unable to give you an answer. So what is the answer? You pass a ball when a supporting player is in a better position than you and is able to take the ball forward with more chance of achieving a score. A player will only know if a supporting player is in a better position if he is watching not only what is happening in front of him but also what is happening in front of the supporting player. This is the open, heads-up rugby ideal that many coaches, players and pundits talk about. If a player understands why he passes a ball, then you are going to develop a player who will be comfortable to carry the ball and will be able to play an open and expansive game.

The standard drills are often known as wave drills, with the players lined up across the line and encouraged to move forwards and pass the ball down the line. This doesn't really achieve much; in fact this leads to aimless passing with the ball being passed backwards and very little encouragement to move forward. Instead, try this drill.



The players start in a queue with the ball at the front. The players set off together and the players in the queue have to fan out across the pitch and receive the ball from their right. The advantage of this, compared to the normal passing wave, is that this drill encourages the players to run at pace, the passer has no option but to pass flat and the ball has to move quickly to the outside. To add pressure, give the players a target, i.e.

start them on the half way line and challenge them to get the ball to the final player before they hit the 10m line.

Once they have accomplished this a few times successfully, then give them a distance target, i.e. start them on the 5m line and challenge them to get the final player to receive the pass in the middle of the pitch. Adjust the distances to suit the age group. Points to note and encourage are many, but vital ones are – for the potential receiver to have hands up and forward of the body to give the passer a target, get the receiver to call “yes” or his/her name before receiving the ball, and try to stop the player taking the ball back into the body before passing on, as this slows down momentum.

Once the players can do this with 100% success (i.e. no dropped balls, good calling etc), then you can increase the pressure. This can be achieved in a number of ways, but the two most obvious ones are to add opponents and add complexity to the passing move.

Adding opponents: use three players with tackle shields standing opposite the starting queue about 10m away (again adjust the distance dependent on the age level of the players). These defenders will also be in a queue. As the command to start is given, the defence fan out to block the first three players. This will put pressure on the passing line but will also enforce the defensive line. Add defenders, but allow the attack an overlap of at least one player. Success is a score; failure is anything else.

Adding complexity to the passing movement increases the pressure. Get the first player to collect the final pass both inside and outside the last man. Get the last man to take the final pass whilst cutting back inside. Do this without a defence and then, when the players have succeeded a number of times, add the defence to increase the pressure. Add variations to this and, if successful, name them and use them in a game. Get the players to come up with their own variations.

Success and failure in this type of drill is obvious to the players and, therefore, is more rewarding than simple wave patterns across the field of play.

This drill and the additions to it should provide the attacking line with more impetus and more dynamism, which can easily be transferred into a game. Don't forget that these drills are as good for forwards as well as backs. Every player has to be comfortable on the ball and has to be able to pass well under pressure.

With mini and midi rugby players, success is everything. Make sure that the drills are simple, make sure that the players are always moving and have definite achievement targets. Provide rewards, find out what their favourite game is and then, as a reward for a good session, let them spend more time playing this game at the end.

A good session-ending game (or even beginning game) is rugby basket ball. Set out a playing area and mark out a box at each end about 2m square. Split the players into manageable teams, with the numbers in each team dependent on the size of the playing area. The rugby ball can be passed in any direction and, to score, the pass has to be received by one of your players who is in the box on the opponents' side of the pitch. Once a player has received the ball he is not allowed to move. This is a non-



contact game and the defenders are not allowed to touch, push or tackle but are allowed to wave their hands and block passes. The game is fast and it encourages movement and calling - great skills for a rugby player. If you have more than two teams, then rotate them regularly - perhaps every time a basket is scored. The winner stays on.