

THE STRUCTURED SEASON

By
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The author was so frustrated that there is no book like Jim Greenwood's for younger players that he decided to write down his thoughts when he read the Editor's plea for more articles for coaches of those younger players. He is U9 coach at the Ealing club.

My ideas about how to organise the season are very simple and have been discovered, or worked out by many others who have arrived at the same, or very similar, conclusion. I just wish I had had this plan from the start rather than developing it over four years. You recall that our objective as coaches is to get the maximum benefit for the maximum number of our children as possible. Hot-housing the more developed players will damage the majority, but going at the pace of the newest and weakest will also damage the majority.

The answer is to split the season into two. From September to Christmas is the development phase and after Christmas we divide into squads.

Training September – Christmas.

From September we operate as an age group. We do training in mixed squads, dividing up by date of birth or letters of the alphabet. Everyone gets the same training, everyone does the same drills.

5-10 mins. Quick warm up.

15-40 mins. Group training. All players do two or three skills-based practices in mixed ability groups. The training sessions are usually in groups of ten or twelve.

Between 20-40 mins, depending on the age group. Matches in mixed teams. Matches may have rules changed to promote skills which have been developed during the session (e.g. three steps and then pass).

5 Mins. Awards such as Player Of The Week, Most Improved Player, Best Tackle etc.

During this first phase we assess constantly so that at Christmas we are able to split into three squads. We call them Lions, Tigers and Pumas. (But don't think for a moment that the children don't know they are A, B and C.)

This approach does disadvantage the very best players in this part of the season. There is no doubt about this. I have seen clubs that segregate their As from their Bs and Cs from the start, and they often appear to be streaking ahead. But at what cost to group spirit? Our As have another eighteen weeks to work together so they will be fine. It does, however, benefit the learners and those on an earlier part of the development line. They can see at first hand the demonstration of the skills you wish to develop in them and, providing it is constantly stressed that they can learn these skills just as well as the more developed players, then they will learn much faster.

The problem with this plan is fixtures. In an ideal world every club would work to the same plan so fixtures from September to Christmas would be friendlies. However, it doesn't work like that in practice. Our Home Festival is in October. We put up the best A and B sides we can. We could put in mixed teams, but in my experience that will mean that the nominated A side is fatally weakened and loses all its games, whereas the B side, containing a few 'A' players, wins all their games and the other clubs are suspicious that we have rigged it. I do believe that losing does teams a world of good, but it is not at all beneficial if they lose all their games in a long, hard festival. That's just painful for everyone.

But many fixtures can be treated in a much more creative way; simple balancing of teams between clubs means players can try new positions and play with new team-mates. I will put up one side with A forwards and backs from the Bs and Cs, and another with the B forwards and a mix of A and C backs. It's not hard to come up with simple changes that benefit the maximum number.

Christmas – Summer.

At Christmas we announce squads. This is usually after a certain amount of negotiation between coaches and parents. If a child has played mostly in what he sees as the As and is then 'dropped' to the Bs, or the Bs to the Cs, it needs to be explained carefully. It is not unknown for a child not to want to rise in the squads' hierarchy. I'm always impressed when they are self-aware enough to realise they will be happier in a lower squad. I will return to the 'dropped' word later.

The squads are made up at the minimum numbers necessary. In Tag we select nine players for seven-person teams. At U9, there are eleven selections for nine players on the pitch.

Training Christmas – Summer.

Despite 'squadding-up' we try really hard to keep the group spirit going. Training is split into five parts and the precise timings depend on the age group.

5-10 mins. Quick warm up.

15-40 mins. Group training where all do one or two skills-based practices in mixed ability groups. Training sessions are usually in groups of ten or twelve.

15-35 mins. Squad training, decided by squad coaches.

Between 20 and 40 mins, depending on age group. Matches. As v Bs v Cs, or the sides can be mixed, depending on training requirements. Matches may have rules changed to promote skills which have been developed during the session (e.g. three steps and then pass).

5 Mins. Awards such as Player Of The Week, Most Improved Player, Best Tackle etc etc.

Nothing binds people of any age to groups more than a sense of belonging. The structured season builds a sense of belonging, firstly of a larger group with all abilities and all types, then of a smaller, tighter, closer group. It is very much a band of brothers. But we must never lose sight of the bigger picture. As the season goes by the players start to make real bonds with those about them. They build up knowledge and respect. These bonds make their rugby mean more to them, which helps to create winning sides.