

# **FLAIR VERSUS STRUCTURE – COACHING YOUNG PLAYERS**

## **BY**

## **DAVE HADFIELD.**

The author manages his own company, MindPlus, in New Zealand. He is currently under contract to the New Zealand Rugby Union and works with representative sides' coaches and teams, academies and corporations throughout New Zealand.

This topic is dear to my heart and I have discovered it is dear to the hearts of many coaches I have recently come across attending courses at the Institute of Rugby. The topic is how much structure coaches should impose on their players in the form of sequencing or pre-planning and how much players should be left alone to use *their* ability or flair to react to the unfolding scene they see before them. I did a session on this topic at the High Performance Upskilling course late in 2004 and there was passionate debate among the coaches about the issue. Coaches use sequencing so that their players know what is happening from a set play while the other team does not. This allows for economy of player movement and provides an opportunity to create space or mismatches. At the very elite level I get the feeling that coaches are now moving away from too much sequencing, but I wonder whether that message has trickled down effectively to lower levels.

You may ask what am I doing writing about this stuff. I normally write about the 'how' of coaching rather than the 'what' and usually concern myself with psychological and teaching aspects of coaching. However, this topic really does come under the heading of decision-making and, as somebody fascinated with the psychology of sport, this is very much an area in which I am interested. What sparked this article? Well, one of the coaches at the course has a twelve year-old son who has been playing rep rugby for his union and the coaches of this team have had the boys using a number of sequences, something which has horrified his father (and me) when it became known!

What's wrong with that, you may ask? Rugby teams have used some sort of pre-organisation for many, many years and they have been called 'moves' for most of those years. To me (and players of my era), a move may be defined as a choreographed set of movements, often involving deception, which involve running, passing and evasion. It may be a "Willie-away" from a lineout, a 12 and 13 cut in the backline (or something much more complicated), or a "Lefto" from an attacking scrum where the Number 8 picks up, draws the half-back and puts the blindside winger in space (we Number 8s love

that one!). Nowadays the term ‘move’ seems to be used less frequently, at least at elite level, and there are different terms, such as ‘starter moves’, ‘runner calls’ and ‘sequences’ used. While most of you will know what they all are, I believe it is worthwhile to define them briefly before discussing the implications for coaching young players.

*Starter moves* are when a team pre-plans what will happen after a set piece. For example, the team may win the ball from a lineout, 9 passes to 10, 10 to 12 and the 12 takes a tackle in midfield; from there the team will continue to take play the same way after the ruck. *Runner calls* normally refer to what players are doing either before or after they pass the ball. For example, a player may pass the ball to a team-mate and then call “Jimmy.” This means that the player who originally passed the ball loops around and the player who was first passed the ball immediately gives a return ball. A *sequence* is similar to a series of starter moves. For example, a sequence may consist of a short lineout where the ball is delivered off the top to the halfback who throws a flat ball to the flanker. From the ensuing ruck the ball goes the same way to number 12, who takes the ball forward and sets up another ruck. From there the ball goes the same way for one more ruck before sweeping back quickly the other way.

Now that the terms are out of the way, let's look at the issues as they apply to young players learning decision-making. There are two kinds of decisions that players are called upon to make in rugby. The first kind is analytical or strategic decisions. These are decisions where players have time to decide which decision they will choose from a range of options. For example, when a team receives a penalty in the opponents' half, the captain must make a decision - will he kick for touch or kick for goal? When the player who is calling the lineouts is approaching the lineout, he must decide where the throw will go – will it go to number two, number four or the back? Will it be a five-man lineout, a full lineout or another formation? These are analytical decisions and players can be trained to improve these decisions using a number of coaching techniques, including case studies, studying video, talking about various situations, creating match simulations, training and, of course, learning by playing the game.

The second kind of decisions players have to make during games are intuitive (or instinctive) decisions. These are decisions where the player does not think, but merely reacts to what he sees in front of him. There is no conscious decision-making, rather the brain recognises the situation based on information given to it by the eyes and it subconsciously sends a message to the body to react in a way that has been learned and patterned. In many ways, these decisions cannot be ‘taught’ by a coach; it is more likely that they can merely be learned by doing. Training instinctive decision-making is extremely challenging, but the best way to do it is by providing simulated match conditions, giving the players an objective and letting them go to it. The coach can guide them by questioning, which is designed to add to understanding.

In my opinion, one of the great areas of strength we have always had in New Zealand Rugby has been our ability to recognise space, to make decisions to use that space creatively and having the skill level to execute the decision successfully when it is made. You can call that flair if you want to - that's pretty much how I define flair anyway. This flair is learnt through playing the game and through simulated games and small-sided games at training. If you want to see this learning in action, go to any New Zealand Rugby ground on Saturday morning and watch young rugby players swarming around like bees, learning gradually about the aims of the game, about space, about passing and running. The longer they play, the more they learn. Of course, some learn more quickly than others. Some youngsters seem to have an innate ability to recognise space and to run into it, while others just don't seem to get it (and may never get it).

In order for me to explain why I have concerns about the use of sequences by young players, I need to explain briefly some core principles of attention and concentration. I will explain this more fully in another article, but for the meantime it is enough to know that, when talking about human attention, we need to understand that there are two aspects - that which is going on in the outside world (external) and that which is going on inside our head (internal). The external aspect is easy to understand - it refers to everything that is happening around us. This information may be visual or aural, or it may be smells or sensations. In a game of rugby, the key things we need to attend to are visual information (that which we see in front of us all in our peripheral vision) and aural information (the calls from our team-mates). The internal aspect of attention refers to everything that happens in our minds - thoughts, feelings and emotions. In everyday life, our mind is constantly occupied. It's just that often we are not aware of this. There is a constant chatter that goes on inside our head that we do not have awareness of unless we're focused on it. The point is that the human mind is only capable of effectively processing a certain amount of information and we find it very difficult to be focused on something complex or compelling inside our mind while at the same time focusing on something in the outside world that requires considerable attention.

If you don't believe me, try the following exercise. Get one of your players to stand two metres away from you. Get two rugby balls and start throwing them between you - both at the same time (so you're both throwing and catching balls at the same time). Get a steady rhythm going and then ask the player to start counting out loud backwards from 60 in threes (60, 57, 54 etc). Once he gets going with the counting, start throwing balls up to his left and down to his right (so that he has to start concentrating more on the external environment). If he can cope with that and still keep up with the counting, start baulking and vary the speed of throwing. At some stage, you'll find that something has to give. Either the player will start dropping balls or he will be unable to continue counting. You can 'up the ante' on the internal concentration by asking the player to count backwards from 500 in thirteens, or from 1000 in seventeens; or you can ask him to drive from Auckland to Wellington in his mind and tell you the towns he goes through in order.

This is a great little exercise to demonstrate that is very difficult to be concentrating on something inside your mind while concentrating on something unpredictable in the external environment. How does this relate to the issue of young players being asked to use sequences? Well, in order for the young player to be able to develop flair he needs to give all of his attention to what is happening in the outside world - he needs to focus on what is happening to the movement of the players all around him. Rugby is an unpredictable game; he does not know where players are going to be going or what they are going to be doing. In order for him to use space, he first has to recognise it and, in order to recognise it, he has to be intently focused on when and where space is developing. If a young player is being asked to use a sequence or sequences, he has to learn those sequences and remember them. Then he has to be able to access that memory during a game. Think back to the exercise of throwing the ball and counting (or driving from Auckland to Wellington) and think how that relates to a young player running around a rugby field trying to take in all the movement in the external environment (to pick up patterns of movement that guide his instinctive decision-making) while trying to remember the nature of a pre-planned sequence that may have three or more phases involved. What happens is that something is compromised. Either the player is unable to remember the sequence or he is unable to pick up effective information from what is happening around him. In my experience, players are strongly motivated to remember and to perform sequences. They know that's what the coach has asked them to do and most young players want to do what the coach asks them to do.

I believe that what is most compromised is the development of flair. As I've already said, in order for players to use space they first have to recognise it (before they can make creative decisions and use their skills) and they won't be able to recognise it unless they are appropriately focused on picking up the information. If they are trying to access information from their long-term memory (which they need to do if they are to remember the sequence) then their ability to be appropriately focused on the external rugby environment is put at risk. Of course, if a sequence becomes so well learned that the players can reproduce it intuitively then this becomes less of a problem, but most young teams do not train for sufficient time to allow this to happen.

I don't know how many of you coaches working with young players have used sequencing and maybe I am making more of an issue of it than I need to. However, after talking to many coaches, I do believe that it is something that is worth flagging. I believe that coaches coaching at under 16 level at least ought to be focused entirely on player development. Of course, part of player development is learning how to win, but far more important is to guide the players to develop technically, tactically, physically and mentally, to teach them sound values and to develop character. When it comes to the tactical side of the game, I believe that young players need to be given every opportunity to develop the flair for which New Zealand Rugby is so well-known. They will develop flair if they are coached to develop sound skills. They will develop flair if they play rugby in an environment which encourages them to recognise space and to use it



creatively and effectively. The clearer their minds, the more they will be able to focus on what they see in front of them. So use sequencing with care and use it with an understanding of the issues involved.