

## IDENTIFYING ENGLAND INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS OF THE FUTURE.

### BRIAN ASHTON.

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*He is the current England 'A' head coach, was the England national assistant coach in charge of the attacking game and the backs 1998-2002, was Ireland's national coach 1997-98, headed the coaching team at Bath 1994-97 after being assistant coach 1989-94, led the coaching team of England Colts 1981-85 and was player coach in Milan 1976-79.*

*At an Academy Managers' Day at Bath on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005, he dealt with this subject (identifying England international players of the future) and suggested that we need to be thinking ahead to 2011 rather than concentrating on 2007. The game will change and the teams that try to forecast what will be needed may get a vital edge if they can foresee how the game might develop and what type of players will be needed to match those changes.*

*This is far removed from most coaches' brief as they have a very short-term need to win next Saturday and their resources are limited. However, there are pointers within the scope of the talk that can help even the shortest-term coaches and looking ahead and trying to plan for the future is no bad thing – even at club level.*

*Brian Ashton was, however, trying to look ahead for England success and this is what he said.*

### IDENTIFICATION.

- Is talent identification a *science* and can you measure it? It is relatively straightforward in any closed sport/activity where the athlete performs one closed skill, but it gets harder in games like rugby where so many skills are being performed simultaneously and where scoring and victory can be a major influence on what we think of a player.
- Is identification an *art*? A player may look good and that could be an important consideration.
- Is the selector's *experience* important? If he knows what is needed, should his assessment be sufficient?

- Or, is it more likely to be a **combination** of all three?
- Whatever the answer is, any player who is to make it to the top of the game must have '**wow**' **factor**. He has to have that certain quality that presents his case immediately to anybody who is watching him.

## HIGH LEVEL PERFORMANCE.

Once the identification and selection process has been started, the player has to be heading towards the main components of high level performance. There are many such components but they can be summarised in the following categories.

- Technical.
- Physical.
- Game understanding.
- Mental.

## TECHNICAL.

The game at the highest level is looking for:

- Core skills.
- Better than all-round competency in all skills.
- Players who are world-class who are at least as good as, or better than, the best players in the world in their expertise/area/position.
- Positional skills.
- Fundamental requirements for the position the player plays in.
- A player who **brings something different to the party**, as there are many other players who have positional skills and the fundamental requirements for their position.

## PHYSICAL CONDITIONING.

Physical conditioning has six main areas consisting of,

- Pace.
- Strength.
- Power.
- Endurance.
- Flexibility.
- Core stability.

They are all very important for any player, but they are only tools to help him perform on the pitch and possibly to allow him the benefit of a long career. Physical conditioning is

the easiest area to develop and any progress and improvement can be measured accurately.

## MENTAL SKILLS.

We have to be able to define what we mean by mental skills, as it is a term that can mean just about anything.

- The first stage is for a player to be able to *think clearly and correctly* when he is under maximum pressure.
- He then has to *act clearly and correctly* under maximum pressure.
- He must be able to deal with distractions and they can come in many shapes and forms through the weather, referee's decisions, errors, even sledging from opponents.
- He must have the ability to focus on the process of what he is doing and on the next task, as what has happened can not be affected.
- He must learn not to dwell on failure.
- And if there has been a failure, the player has to use that failure positively to achieve success. He has to be able to operate with the attitude of, "It happens to everybody. I've got everything else right. I will be successful."

## GENERAL.

The successful player will have

- The 'wow' factor.
- The ability to excite.
- Something that frightens the conservatives in the game.

## DEVELOPING AND COACHING ENGLAND INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS OF THE FUTURE.

### DEVELOPMENT COACHING ESSENTIALS.

- There must be an elite environment with exceptionally high standards throughout the game..
- There has to be a step-by-step approach as the process of developing an elite player could take five or six years.
- The programme must be reviewed and revised as often as it takes and it has to have built-in flexibility.

- A training routine has to be developed and this will, by necessity, be repetitive. It can be repetitive in a creative manner to avoid boredom, but there must be repetition.
- The talk and the environment have to be positive. Negativity has to be avoided.
- The player will require one-on-one discussion and analysis. He is already special if he has been identified as a potential international in the future so make him feel special.
- Feedback to the player is very important and it is easy to forget it. The player needs specific feedback on what *he* is doing.
- The player has to be put under pressure to prepare him for what is to come, if and when he does become an international player.

### **DEVELOPMENT PLAYER ESSENTIALS.**

- There must be a disciplined lifestyle.
- The player must be focused on what he is doing and where he is going. He has to show resolve and commitment.
- He has to have a selfish streak.
- The killer instinct will be there.
- He will have to have self-belief, almost arrogance.
- He will welcome and enjoy pressure.

### **COACHING.**

- We need a vision beyond the next international boundary of 2007.
- We need the courage and belief to know that we have the knowledge and we can provide the tools and the environment for success.
- There has to be leadership *to communicate the vision and to stimulate the necessary change in behaviour.*
- Coaches without a vision have no right to be dealing with young, potential elite players.
- We have to talk more about the game and we must be prepared to share ideas.
- There needs to be more off-field coaching to share and co-operate in reaching the vision.
- We need to use world-class winners from other sports as inspiration and role models for our players.
- Boundaries for the players have to be extended and this is important in research projects at this level. This can be as simple as fatigue measurement and research on recovery, but it is best if players are involved in the research.
- Instil ambition and a ‘no fear’ approach in the players. Make them become prepared to fail at times, but make them willing to learn from failure.
- Equally, players must learn and develop from success.



- The coaching and development process needs to *encourage freedom with discipline as a philosophy of play*. Coaches need hands-on during the week and hands-off when the player is in a game.