

**THE FACTORS THAT MAY LEAD TO COACHING
BURNOUT IN AMATEUR RUGBY.
BY
EAMONN HOGAN.**

The author has been a coach since 1991 and has been privileged to coach and play, always as an amateur, in ten countries around the world. He is presently an EPDC coach with Leicester Tigers and coming to the end of a full-time degree at the University of Lincoln where he has been studying BSc (Hons) Sports Development and Coaching. The following article is based on his dissertation on coach burnout. Burnout is a very relevant topic in today's game and the PRA has just launched a study into the effects this subject has for the player.

NLD is used throughout the article and is the common, shortened version of Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Derbyshire, ELPC stands for Elite Player Development Centre and PRA is the Professional Rugby Players' Association.

'Burnout is an experiential syndrome that is characterised by a sense of mental and physical exhaustion accompanied by feelings of decreased accomplishment, cynicism and diminished empathy'

(Maslach, 1976)

Introduction.

Sometimes the crucial contribution that coaches make is overlooked. (Caborn 2004)

Rugby Union, as a human activity, is not one we can look to for answers to the meaning of life and our success within it. In fact, if truth were told, any sport that is played does not serve any actual purpose. If you win or lose in amateur rugby, then it doesn't change any of your personal circumstances or problems that you had prior to the game taking place. It is, therefore, staggering that sporting diversions such as rugby union are so much a part of our everyday lives.

Ellis Cashmore, in his book 'Making Sense Of Sports', quotes Stoddart's view that sport allows people to possess 'loyalty to team members' and to be 'honest and upright'. It binds people into a common purpose making society, as a whole, a better place within which to exist. Is there anything in the real world that matches the emotions the nation reached during the final moments of England's victory in the 2003 Rugby World Cup final? There is also the personal view of Cashmore, which says that sport relies on the execution of 'individual skills working towards an achievable goal'. The vast majority of coaches try to allow the players to experience these ideals by encouraging beneficial and noteworthy codes of practice that have been passed down through many generations to those who play

and coach today. The difference today, of course, is that we have two different games – one amateur and one professional.

So what about the coaches? When people start their entry into coaching, is it the desire to be as successful as the very best that could ultimately lead to a burnout factor when things do not appear as they had first thought - or is it something else? Do they believe in the fantasy of the coach guru - the ‘cult of the coach,’ if you will?

The study that I undertook strove to provide an answer to the issue of burnout by taking the problem down to the sport’s grassroots. The Community Rugby game is mostly unpaid and is dominated by volunteers who love the game and wish the next generation the same passionate highs and lows that they experienced as players. Therefore, it begs the question: how can you suffer from coaching burnout if the activity you are doing is voluntary and freely participated in? In the printed versions of the RFU Technical Journal (Autumn 2003), Scott Creswell and Robert Eklund gave a summary of what the syndrome is and how it relates to a burnout found in those of the care professions such as doctors and nurses. They have published numerous articles on the subject in the NZRFU publication ‘gamePLAN rugby,’ but their studies mostly concentrated on the psychological and physical manifestations of burnout. This study was put together to identify what external factors led to the coach being ‘burned out’ in the first place.

The study began by narrowing down the background research into relevant areas of discussion over the areas in which a coach might feel let down or under-valued. This was followed by semi-structured conversations with some of the county coaches within NLD. This study narrowed down the areas of study to just six within the grass roots of the game. The questionnaire was sent to two hundred coaches at this level of the game over the period June to December 2004 and their replies were collated and analysed in January 2005. The six areas that were highlighted were:

- Club support of their coaching staff.
- The off-season.
- The England Player Development Centre (EPDC).
- Rugby Development Officers (RDO).
- RFU coach support.
- Promotion within area teams.

[What the study revealed!](#)

“My ambition for sport in the UK is to start a twenty-year process of re-establishing this country as a powerhouse in the sporting world”.

Tessa Jowell, Game Plan, 2002.

Club support of their coaching staff.

For giving up their time as a volunteer, were the clubs supportive of the coaches' efforts in a practical manner? Considering that many of the coaches surveyed were amateurs, the majority said that they were pleased with the way their clubs supported their coaching ambitions and continued personal development. It may seem strange, however, that the results were not as comprehensive (57% well supported v. 43% who were not) as many would have hoped for. In recent years the RFU have stressed the particular importance of volunteers and have recognised the issues that can lead to de-motivation in many of the game's amateur administrators. On their Community Rugby pages concerning volunteers, the RFU do give practical guidelines as to how the administration of the game can be aided with a few simple but practical steps. Although these steps can be adjusted and applied to the role of coach, it would be interesting to see the reaction of the coach if he was referred to as an administrator.

So what about the support of coaches at club level? The first striking issue raised in the responses was that only 43% were not financially rewarded for their efforts at coaching. Although there is only one National league club, Nottingham RFC, within NLD, important questions are raised by looking at the wider issues.

- Where is the money coming from?
- Is this expenditure affecting other areas of the club?
- What do the coaches mean by being 'financially rewarded'?

Further study probably needs to be carried out and, although the data can never be comprehensive, it appeared that the respondents are, for the most part, ambitious coaches who see their role as a specialist role set aside from the common volunteer roles. By intimation, if it is felt that a small majority was getting rewarded financially, will they see their enthusiasm diminish somewhat?

As for the other factors in club support, the majority is given clothing and coaching course support which helps the coach feel valued and promoted by the club as one of their valuable assets. One final comment on club coaching comes from Rod MacQueen, who was the Australian coach when they won the Rugby World Cup in 1999. In the book, *One Step Ahead*, MacQueen has a view that club coaching was much harder than the subsequent coaching he did later in his career. When he began club coaching, he was starting a new business and trying to raise a young family. Later on in his life he was able to put in place practices and structures to better suit his volunteer and business ambitions. Even the very best believe that club coaching can be the most stressful role in the game.

The off-season.

Many of the major RFU seminars and coaching conferences are placed in the months set aside as 'off-season'. Although there is a movement towards doing mini-workshops for clubs during the season, the highest profile seminars tend to be, certainly within NLD, during the months of June, July and August, a period classified as off- or pre-season. Therefore, if there are personal development courses at a time when coaches are recharging their energies, do they feel that it is just a continuance of the season that has just gone or a prelude to the season approaching?

66 % of coaches felt that, if they wish to keep up the process of personal development allied to team success, there is no off-season. It has been common practice for athletes and players to train at their very best in the meso-cycle that is off-season to prepare effectively for the rigours and demands that face them in their competitive season. This applies, to some degree, to all players at all levels. However, this study has revealed that even amateur coaches now feel that the pursuit of rugby progress has with it a realisation that it is year-round commitment. With current playing innovations being seen weekly from around the globe on a variety of media outlets, it is difficult, if you are an ambitious coach, to get away from the fact that any protracted time away from the game will lead to a loss in ground regarding your opposition. It is, therefore, fair to assume that coaches feel they are letting down the players in their team ... in itself, another added pressure.

One cautionary note has come from a coach who stated,

“Three months is insufficient time to fully recharge the batteries, to generate the energy required for nine months of training, coaching, playing, administering, communicating and telephoning. Quality time is the key just to do the job well - combined with looking to personal development.”

The England Player Development Centre (EPDC).

Sometimes called the Elite Player Development Centre, the EPDC programme was put together three years ago in a partnership between the RFU and Sport England. The EPDC is an academy set aside to develop young players between the ages of 14 – 16. It teaches the basic individual skills of the game, as determined by the RFU, where experienced coaches from NLD are brought in by Leicester Tigers to coach the most talented from a selection of county standard boys. Its overall purpose is to centralise all the highest quality players, regardless of position, into one central geographic point.

The E.P.D.C was the source of much comment in the questionnaires. Its purpose, although quite clearly laid out in the Leicester Tigers’ website, is not that well known. The dissatisfaction mainly comes from some misconceptions about the centre, as mentioned in the questionnaires. Some of these are:

- **Team based skills are taught.** The coaches had been under the impression that they would teach their players skills that they could take back to their clubs to improve their chances of success. When the players’ parents went back and confirmed that the emphasis had been on individual core skills, the coaches felt that the players already knew how to execute these skills or they would not be in the EPDC structure in the first place. As a coach within the structure, I do not believe this to be the case.

I often come across coaches who have players in the EPDC and tell me that what we are teaching is just a repeat of what has already been covered and coached; I reply to that by suggesting that we are raising their game by getting them to perform with other talented players. However, this rarely placated them.

- **Unit skills are taught.** This is not totally true. We do cover some patterns at the end of season sessions, but we certainly do not go into great detail as we are well aware that this can lead to conflict with the club coach(es). The club coach may have different ideas and the player gets caught up in the middle. Also, we understood at an early stage that the club patterns are based on their own individual players who may not be blessed with the talent that we see at the EPDC.
- **Players are selected by Leicester Tigers.** This is a political issue and not clearly mentioned in the responses that we had. There is, however, an underlying perception that Leicester Tigers, and to some degree Nottingham, have a ‘history’ in this area – and the old feelings come out in such surveys. Many coaches believe that the best players are ‘cherry-picked’ and the others discarded. This is not entirely true, but it has to be said that the RFU/Sport England process is there to find the best.

Another reason is that if we selected a player and his county coaches decided that he was not good enough for their A or B squads, (this has actually happened), what would happen next? By allowing the county coaches to choose the players who should attend, it is a recognition by the Tigers that those coaches have the best view of players from the grass-roots through development days and trials. It then allows the EPDC coaches, who are all youth coaches in the area, to look at anyone else who has been missed out but is seen as talented.

- **To filter down coaching experience to the lower levels of the game.** Many coaches were unaware of this aim yet the EPDC sessions are neither secret nor held behind closed doors. Anybody who wants to watch the sessions is more than welcome; in the EPDC at Newark we encourage the county coaches to come along, watch and question. Andy Key at Tigers positively encourages this participation and recently did a presentation for the region’s coaches at a recent England U21 match. It has been slow progress but we are getting better attendance.

However, it should be stated that the EPDC was never designed, as far as I am aware, to be a coach development tool. The coaches who work at EPDC do get coach development as a natural product of being there but this is not an RFU remit.

Negatives about the EPDC from the dissertation responses.

- Young players’ aspirations are exaggerated.
- Scepticism of the selection/retention process; EPDC ‘mystique’ – lack of proactive invitations to attend; perceived lack of inclusion of some game related/game situation/game sense work, which can lead to reduced player stimulation, motivation and fun; *complete* lack of feedback to club/county coaches of

performance assessment of either those retained or cut; no advice or recommendations on skill areas that need to be worked on when the player is back at his club (despite the fact that there are existing documents within the system for this very purpose); lack of follow-up on injured players.

- Young players are potentially exposed to burnout and club coaches are not kept in the loop. There could also be clashes in coaching information and style because of this.
- Too much time is being spent on basic skills when players might benefit more from tactical, positional and conditioning advice. Discussions on diet, overplaying and burnout ought to be part of an EPDC format.

In principle, however, many seemed to view the scheme as a positive venture, but it needed clarity as to its purpose and its role in the overall scheme of a player's rugby development. If the coaches, who wish their players to progress, do not seem to be heard or appreciated, then burnout can occur with many leaving the game through disillusionment.

Coaches, especially of young boys, are very concerned about the necessity for *players* to make the decisions about their ambitions. One of those coaches noted,

“I think there needs to be clearer guidelines from the RFU on over-playing. At present there is a conflict between schools and clubs over players. At our club we have players at EPDC, club and county, all of which believe are of the highest priority and there needs to be clear guidance to avoid player burnout.”

In the author's personal experience, the local representatives of the RFU are very proactive in the promotion of concern over player fatigue. But where there are guidelines, should there be cast-iron enforceable rules about the amount of rugby a player is allowed to participate in? Who gets preference over a player's competition time – club, school, county or region?

Rugby Development Officers (RDOs).

The issue of RDOs is another emotive one, which, as with the EPDC, leads many to believe they are all things to all people - when in fact their core role has little to do with many people's ideas of what they should be. They are seen to be the first source of coaching knowledge and, although they are all assessors of coaching standards within the three counties, it is extremely rare that any of them leads a seminar on coaching practice and ideas. It is predominantly, from the research, an administration-based role.

The majority of those questioned were pleased with the role of the RDO, with many comments on how much more varied their knowledge is about the game and some of the less well-known aspects of sport, such as funding. This is especially so since the transition

has taken place from the position of YDO (Youth Development Officer) to RDO. The lack of vested interest gives them an overview of players and club development for the game as a whole and this is generally appreciated. The only negatives seem to be about two areas:

- There seems to be concern that the RFU are asking more and more people to volunteer in order to help with the running of the clubs as opposed to RFU involvement. This is not necessarily a bad idea in principle but, as one coach put it,

“...This is detrimental... to the clubs who are being dictated to and given more unnecessary paperwork.”

Although this is an RFU-driven plan, it is the RDOs who must drive this forward and it is beginning to rankle with many coaches.

- There also seems to be less visibility of RFU representatives on the ground. There seem to be more meetings and less visual presence and hands-on activity by the RFU.

RFU Coach Support.

Dr Craig Stewart (2002) raises a question in his study of coach education in rural areas – “What Knowledge is of most worth?” It is the defining moment in a Rugby Development Officer’s annual planning process to come up with a definitive strategy to answer this question. However, as with most defining, all encompassing strategies, they turn out to be anything but. The RFU, as stated previously, do run seminars on the game throughout the year. The questionnaire was designed to ask if the organisation was getting their messages across locally and to ascertain whether the coaches questioned had alternative ideas, which they believed would be more beneficial to their own personal development, needs.

It is here the RDOs have major problems. NLD has within it Lincolnshire, the second largest county in England with the second *lowest* population of any county in England. So the area is predominantly rural. The cost effectiveness of any coach planning and development usually falls on whether the coaches from the area can get to it without massively impinging on their personal lives. A good example would be a course run at, say, Nottingham with a 6.30pm start; this would require someone leaving his east Lincolnshire base some 2 ½ hours earlier to counter the effects of traffic delays prevalent in a major city. The journey back takes just as long. This is reflected regionally in the ‘Change 4 sport’ document (2004), where there is a recognition that a significant percentage of the region’s 4.1m people lives in the countryside.

These sections within the questionnaire were the most constructive and raised many good ideas from the grassroots coaches. The questionnaire had already asked for comments about the off-season, which includes much time set aside for coach development. These questions asked for other areas that may not have been visible at first but could aid many in

their personal development as coaches. The majority of questionnaires made comment on what could be done to improve them as coaches and, when asked if their comments were achievable, 86% felt they were. But when asked if it was a feasible option financially for the RFU, the figure dropped to 71%. It is intimated, therefore, that coaches have ideas that would have to be implemented at local level without direct RFU involvement, but the better ones needed to be driven and financed by the governing body.

An example of this was the many comments on how ambitious coaches would like their more experienced and knowledgeable peers to become a mentor to them as they progressed to the next coaching level. This area was raised several times and the RFU does have a mentor scheme which is usually developed once a coach gets to Level 3 (*RFU.com 18 Jan 2005*). However, to be accepted on a Level 3 course, it is recommended that at youth Level you coach at least at NLD 18s (or above) level or coach rugby at a National League senior XV. The difficulty here in the NLD geographic area is that promotion is difficult and the level of team play is such that national recognition is hard to achieve. (*As stated earlier, NLD has only one National League team.*) The financial realities of this scheme are that to get an experienced coach to go into a club and mentor, would mean that he would need some form of expenses and official recognition (*clothing, access to coaching practices further up*) that would mean the RFU would have to pay out a great deal of money.

Other recommendations that were less expensive were the creation of a coaching newsletter locally, opportunities to work alongside other coaches and guidance on ‘grass time’ coaching as opposed to the theoretical aspects of unit and team play that were already covered and developed through RFU coaching seminars.

Promotion Within Area Teams

Recognition of achievements often leads to promotion within a professional role and the questionnaire asked the coaches if they felt that this was also the case in their amateur roles within NLD. Mahatma Gandhi once said that, “Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is.” (*Wisdom Quotes. 2005*). The same could also be said of local politics and grassroots rugby. In a sport that is amateur, the politics of ‘empire building’ is just as prevalent in amateur sport as it is in business and it is a pastime that seems to be prevalent throughout NLD. The parochialism and self-interest that is rife throughout the region is a theme that has emerged in several areas. The coaches felt that there is a need for committees to get bigger if they want to receive funding from the RFU.

Although it would be hard for the coaches in NLD to argue that any role on a committee is not important to the growth of rugby, the unwieldiness of the system, however more efficient in principle, is an area that many feel has now become an issue of much distress. Rugby used to pride itself on the personal contact made with other players and clubs. Now it seems that this personal touch has all but disappeared in a plethora of red tape and paperwork, resulting in many seeking help and advice and getting referred to another

person whom they should have called in the first place. As one coach succinctly put it, “I want to find out stuff from a fellow colleague but I feel as if I am phoning a call centre in India.”

Indirectly, this has led to comment about promotion of ambitious coaches to county rugby teams. There has been some comment made about not only the CB team (NLD), but also of the county sides. 71% of the coaches questioned did not feel there are opportunities for advancement within NLD rugby, which leads to the conclusion that this is a very emotive area. It is also relevant that when the NLD RFU asked for people to put their name forward for promotion or roles within NLD teams in 2003, a significant majority was aware of that

request for applications and it has *still* not placated the feeling of disillusionment. So what has gone wrong?

From the analysis of the results received, coaches want to know which single person or source has the final say on any coaching matter; the fact that there seems to be no such individual (person or source) has led to coaches’ consternation. In the research for this study, it was difficult to find anyone who had the definitive word on anything. This can only be a symptom of one of two things:

1. That no-one is willing to jeopardise any chance of further personal promotion by criticising existing standards or
2. That the system is so large now that no one genuinely has a clue where his or her sphere of influence begins and ends.

A notable comment on this subject comes from Rugby World Cup winning coach, Sir Clive Woodward, who gives his view of the English game as he saw it the beginning of his tenure.

“By its very nature, an organisation that... looks after 2000 rugby clubs dotted around England alone... and run by a committee and popular vote...had to be slow moving, conservative and careful in order to survive and prosper as it had.”

Although not about rugby union in particular, the ‘Change 4 Sport’ document has a comment about English sport’s progress as a whole:

“The system in East Midlands is overcomplicated, with organisations and individuals who have overlapping responsibilities. A lot of time and energy is put into developing relationships and positioning organisations. In some cases, behaviour is territorial and not always in the best interests of the end user.”

It is a brave statement by the Sport England East Midlands that recognises an area that many have felt dissatisfaction with for many years in NLD. It is even sadder to discover

that it is a national, multi-sport issue and not one symptomatic of just the rugby game. A clear demarcation/specification of each person's role seems to be lacking and the issues that need to be addressed in regards to coaching promotion seem to be lost in a haze of haphazard confusion, often leading to decisions and results that are the opposite to what coaches need. It is quite clear that disillusionment with the prospects of promotion does result in many good players being left out or not recommended, because many coaches believe that their charges will not be sufficiently well catered for at representative level.

Although it is possible that this may well be one disgruntled person's view of the issue, the theme runs throughout the study that many are not happy with the way the way coaches are administered at county and NLD level.

CONCLUSION.

Is burnout caused by FOREVER pursuing the kudos attached to achieving your own personal podium? What do the coaches classify as success within the rugby game? The successful pursuit of a goal is something that all wish to achieve and many volunteers see a path required to achieve that success. In the questionnaire, guidance as to what many see as a way forward is given for analysis and further discussion.

Throwing money at a problem in the hope of solving it is very often not an option left open to local CBs. However, there has to be a structure that listens to coaches and can ease paths and reduce obstacles; this has more to do with success than the releasing of thousands of pounds. When money is not available, a coach can find his worth by creating structures and systems that can create a palette for his teams to express themselves.

In the views of the coaches that replied to the NLD questionnaire, there is a fiscal reality that they were willing to work within and, although many would like more kit, funding and travel expenses, they realise that the game cannot sustain that investment. It therefore boils down to the skills of the administrators in the game to create the umbrella for coaches to work under. It is the recognition of those within the NLD area that team success does not come solely from the pursuit of the Corinthian spirit; they must realise that success needs to be encouraged by adhering to many of the lessons learned in the answers that have arisen from this study. None is more important than transparency of process and support of ideals – these are clearly the areas where lessons need to be learned.

What Has Emerged Since The Study Was Concluded?

In December, 2004, a provisional copy of these results was given to the RDOs, to the RRDM with concern for NLD and, via them, to the RFU. This was some three months before the dissertation was handed in. The results may have looked out of context in relation to the overall study but the relevant parties analysed the information with great

enthusiasm. Although it is a little early to change local plans, the planning stages for next season will be taking into account the comments of the coaches.

Des Diamond, who had been most helpful in the research stages for the original dissertation, sent me an advance copy of the RFU Rugby Union Mentoring programme, which is soon to be launched. It addresses directly the request that many coaches have about a local person with coaching experiences and his progress through levels 2 and 3. Through this programme, it is hoped that, if this study were to be repeated over the next few years, this area of concern will be lessened significantly - if not eliminated altogether.

One comment concerning the NLD website was heeded and it is now more regularly updated with relevant and current events. It is now being seen as the primary source of knowledge through the NLD CB.

Changes to the NLD schools' and clubs' combined team are being evaluated for next season and the 18s' coaches are now being asked to integrate more with the 17s' team to reduce the need for overplaying the players over the summer period.

Leicester Tigers are continually reviewing any strategy that may help the negatives of the process to be addressed. At a meeting in May, all EPDC coaches gave their opinions in open forum about what each EPDC felt were the positives and negatives of the present structure. The process is now entering its fourth year and continues to evolve successfully with new ideas and plans formulated for next season.

An Elite Coaches programme, tutored by Mike Penistone (*Tigers Academy Coaching Staff*) has reached the end of its first year. The practical areas of this programme utilise the EPDC players as participants so they have the chance to experience coaching practices from a highly qualified coach, while the area's coaches can watch and interact with him during the course. Richard Cockerill is one such coach who has been a guest presenter on the coaches' programme. It is hoped that this programme will continue next season.