

## THE NATAL COACHING EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

By  
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*He saw an advert on the RFU website for a place on an exchange visit to view the Natal coaching programme, applied successfully and the article below contains some of his observations on coaching there.*

The structure of Natal's Coach Development Programme is:

- Colin Heard, Head of Coach Development.
- Charles Louw, High Performance Manager.
- Grant Bashford, responsible for coach development in clubs.
- Garth Giles, responsible for coach development in schools.
- Richard de Jager, Transformation Development Manager

All are based at the ABSA Stadium in Durban and the Coaching Awards are at Level 1 to Level 3. As part of their remit Charles, Grant and Garth assist in selection and coaching of the age-group provincial teams, but this stops at 18 when players move over to the Natal Sharks academy where a variety of contracts is available.

Interestingly this side, the coach development area, of the rugby organisation is completely separate from the Natal Sharks' areas organisation. The Super 12 franchise works in isolation, including the Academy, which has its own staffing arrangements.

Natal rugby is organised thus:

- Super 12 team.
- Provincial team that plays in the Currie Cup.
- Premiership league of 9 teams.
- Beneath this, 4 leagues of 6 regional based teams.
- Beneath this, local leagues that are geographically based.

Schools rugby is highly developed and very strong, both historically and socially. It is heavily coached and extremely competitive. Fixtures are held on Saturdays, starting early morning with Junior teams and building to a climax throughout the day to the 1<sup>st</sup>

XV game KO at 3pm, with crowds of up to 10,000 watching. Whilst we were there, Kearsney v Glenwood was played on Saturday afternoon, even though South Africa were playing France at the same time in the same city. This in itself becomes a problem area for player recruitment/ retention; when students leave school, unless they are selected for the Academy, they play for local clubs with small crowds and little atmosphere when compared with their school fixtures, thus motivation to continue playing is a serious problem area.

There appear to be many similarities between their system and the American High School/University system. Nearly all the provinces are linked to high profile Universities which host their academies; Stellenbosch is the classic example of how the system works. Natal, however, is not linked to a University and provides all its educational needs in-house at the ABSA stadium. Indeed the similarities and difficulties in the development of rugby between South Africa and the USA are striking, as the sheer size of the country makes travelling a logistical problem that is very difficult to overcome without a considerable amount of capital investment. Once the distances are managed, another of the major problem areas of South Africa is the lack of a public transport system to get teams around easily.

Political issues also cloud coaching organisation and development. At provincial level there is a distinct problem with the promotion of ex-players to high profile coaching roles when they have no prior background of coaching knowledge or qualifications. There is no pre-requisite for a player to have gained any coaching qualification and there is no specified route for the above people to move up the organisation. It is a widely regarded supposition that the Super 12/Currie Cup team is a separate entity and that it is politically controlled.

Issues in development of the game:

- The size of the province causes problems with coach education.
- A large proportion of the budget goes towards providing transport to promising players to attend coaching sessions, especially for players from rural districts.
- This applies also to teams attending games. Mini buses have to be hired to transport players from their schools to the nearest playing facility.

Before 1974 there was no TV in South Africa, but now TV and video games have made an impact with a change in culture. There is also growing parental concern for the safety of children, even though primary schools rugby is strongly promoted by male teachers. There appears to be no awareness of Tag Rugby and its potential as a development tool. Everyone seems to play touch rugby with all its bad habits; this can be seen being played at internationals, as part of a warm-up, to clubs and schools.

Zululand development.

In the company of Shambalala, a Development Coach, and Lucky, a coach, we visited a Junior School in a township in Empangeni, Northern Natal. The school is relatively new and, although basic, facilities include a large, hard play area and a games field.

We met the principal and talked to twelve boys who are part of the development programme.

At a secondary school, we met the principal and a large group of players, one of whom is a member of the Natal team which has travelled overseas to Australia and England. Four others are members of the Natal Development team.

We visited a girls' secondary school where we met ten girls who play rugby, one for Natal. The enthusiasm engendered by their coaches is impressive to see and the progress being made is considerable, especially when you consider that until fifteen years ago education was a luxury afforded to the few; now all children attend school until the age of sixteen. The government is spending a great deal of money providing the necessary facilities to improve the educational standards within the province. Discipline in the schools is relatively strict when compared with European standards, but the children have a positive attitude towards education and apply themselves wholeheartedly to all aspects and activities.

Despite football being the game played by the majority, Zululand University provides the facility for the development of games and coaching. Kit had been donated by an English touring team and the match we watched was a mixed age group U12 to U15. Lifting in the line-out was legal, enthusiasm undoubted, but understanding of the game rudimentary.

Facilities are being provided and improved. In a visit to Francis Bay, a nearby town, we saw a communal facility that has been recently built by the local authority. It consists of football pitches (2 floodlit), a rugby pitch, a hockey pitch and tennis courts. All are self-contained in one area with changing accommodation. Facilities, however, are not the total answer and a major problem is that very few coloured players have enough experience of the game to take their experience into coaching. The fact that there are twelve languages spoken in the province is another complication to development.



Richard de Jager arranged for us to visit and watch the Jaguars play a premier league match versus Glenwood Old Boys on the Jaguars' home ground. The ground

has been built in the middle of a township in Durban and it has its own clubhouse plus new floodlighting that was provided by a lotto grant bid.

The game was easily the equivalent of a National League 2 game in terms of pace, commitment and individual qualities, but it did not have the level of organisation, tactical or defensive, that we take for granted.

### Coaching Observations in South Africa.

#### 1. Glenwood High School 18-19 year old boys.

The content was a line-out session and it was of a level that few professional sides in the UK could match. It included the complete range of line-out options with a wide variety of plays coming from each throw. Timing and execution were very precise, indicating that they had practised intensively to reach this level.

A scrummaging session followed and it belied the fact that they could only push 1.5 metres. There was emphasis on the eight-man push with three drives per set on a sled with *very* heavy concrete ballast. John Allen, the former Springbok hooker and former student at the school, had been recruited to coach the forwards.

#### 2. Kwa Zulu Natal U16 V Pumas U16.

This was a provincial warm-up game before the home team departed to attend a provincial residential tournament. All the players had considerable individual skills but not an understanding of their positional roles. The team was made up of a mixture of players from recognised high schools and clubs.

#### 3. Premiership club Empangeni.

There was a massed game of touch rugby in progress when we arrived. The club boasted an excellent playing surface on the main pitch, good floodlights and a good clubhouse that was also a social centre. The second training pitch also had adequate floodlighting and access to a scrummaging machine.

Teams that train on a Thursday evening included the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and U20s. The first two teams play in the Premiership whilst the 3<sup>rd</sup> team play in the local league as Empangeni 1<sup>st</sup> XV.

Following a static stretching session, the team went through a basic handling session. There was no opposition and the content of the work was not at all game related. There followed some Auckland grid work. Coaches organised everything but no coaching took place.

Line-out practice was very basic and poor lifting technique was evident. There was no variety in throwing options.

The scrummaging session followed a formula of hit and drive, back row break off and hit tackle bags ten metres away. Whilst these tackles took place, all the others watched.

Back play consisted of running through moves with no opposition. This unopposed run-through had little or no relevance to any game situations, but to the players' credit it was done at considerable pace.

All teams that we watched had a very positive attitude and no player questioned any aspect of the practice.

All coaches were former players from the town with no coaching qualifications or previous experience, with the exception of Simon Harvey, the 1<sup>st</sup> XV coach.

The club is in the process of trying to establish an academy in the town. At present, young talent has to travel for over two hours to Durban to access an academy. The club also loses talented players to other clubs in Durban, which is affecting the performance of the team.

At present, of the eight teams in the Premiership, six of them are based in Durban with one in Empangeni and one in Pietemaritzburg.

There is a proposal that, to bridge the gap between club and provincial rugby, a semi-professional league be formed of forty clubs, four in each province. Obviously there are political and social problems regarding which clubs are chosen to become part of this league. The present top four in the league consider themselves as major contenders, whilst clubs such as Empangeni in Zululand and the Jaguars in Durban see their clubs as having considerable potential for the development of the game in Natal.

#### 4. South Africa training at the ABSA Stadium, Durban.

A handling warm-up session used a variety of different sized rugby balls and different length of passes was asked for. This was followed by stretching then that lead into two games of touch rugby.

After the touch there was a combined practice with the forwards going through three phases with pods of three players. There was one carrier with two supports (leeching). They would drive into bags before releasing the ball to the backs.

A traditional split of backs and forwards followed. The backs ran through a series of pre-planned moves using players on different running lines. Everything was done at considerable pace, leaving little or no room for adjustment or error. They followed with kicking and catching practice.

At the same time the forwards had a scrummaging practice on a machine, where they concentrated on timed drives and they highlighted cohesion as a priority. A line-out practice followed. This was static and had a success rate of 50%.

5. Second South African session at Crawford School.

This was a defensive session run by Jake White, the South African coach. He does not use a defensive coach and prefers to lay out the ground rules himself. His reasoning is that if he has to drop a player for missing tackles or not being in a defensive line up, the player cannot use the excuse of saying the defensive coach told him something that was at odds with what the coach wanted. It started and finished with Jake White.

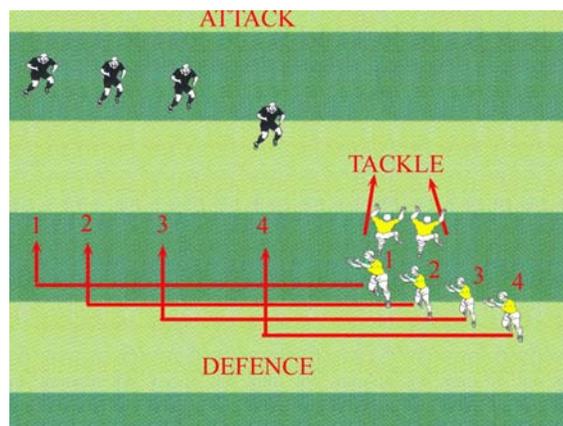
All drills were preplanned and time allocated was rigidly followed in a total session of one hour.

(a) Warm up in defensive waves of eight players in a 40m channel. They came up together on the coach's order and held their straight line and the spaces between each player. Then they would stop and retreat on a further coach's command. The third part was when the outside player took over and gave the signal for the whole line to come up again together as if they were defending as a unit.

(b) Eight players again. Three tackle bags spread over width of the field, each given a number.

Coach calls bag 1, 2, or 3 and there is a simulated double tackle on that bag. The remaining six other players regroup quickly to make up a defensive line. Team B attacked from that bag. The defenders aim to reorganise and offer only a holding defence without tackles.

(c) This is what should have happened and it was practised:



Drill C was supposed to build up seamlessly into the organisation that the coach required – but in many cases, defender 1 would go to defend against the nearest attacker and defender 4 would try to go to the wing. Even though there were still apparent problems they stuck to the time limits and moved on to the next activity.

(d) Team pattern defence.

They practised with a sweeper in behind defensive line that was running a shallow pattern. Percy Montgomery had a problem with his left wing, who continually went up with the line instead of dropping back to cover the left side of field when Montgomery moved over to cover the right side of the field

(e) Forward Line-out defence practice.

They practised with 3 pods of defence against the remainder of the players and persisted even when Garth Giles went over and pointed out that France, in the previous day's practice, were obviously going to use shortened line-outs.

6. France training at Glenwood High School.

The session started with defensive patterns where there were 2 groups of 8 forwards defending against 7 backs attacking.

The emphasis was on blocking/holding (without too much contact and certainly not a tackle). Each group played for approximately one minute before being taken off and replaced by the second group.

The session was short, sharp and focussed. Emphasis was on quick feet and hands even though the actual running pace was quite slow.

Team play – integrated.

The play started from a mini line-out, moved to the middle of the field then the ball was played off this area. There was a variety of passes, some short, some back to where they came from and others to the open spaces going the same way. We saw a range of short passes, a variety of different running angles and lots of offloads at contact areas. The switch, drop off and inside passes were all executed with soft, quick hands. There was not necessarily much forward momentum initially until the break had been made.

The inside pass produced an outside run and then a circle ball. Chip kicks or wide diagonal kicks were used after two or three plays if the defence had not been breached.

Backs finished with place kicking or kicking and catching.

Forwards had seven minutes of line-out practice. This part was short and very efficient with a 95% success rate.

The whole French session was very integrated with the players, backs and forwards, working at recognising their roles within the framework established by Laporte

## 7. Test Match                      South Africa 30pts v France 30pts.

There was a total contrast in two different styles of playing rugby.

South Africa were basically confrontational, very physical and direct but surprisingly, at times, willing to play a more expansive game. However, it was very evident that even the backs were not as confident at carrying and using the ball as the French.

Interestingly, some of the most appreciated aspects of the game applauded by the crowd were physical hits made by South African players. It is very much the way the game is perceived by the home nation; it is highly physical and confrontational.

The French played very much as they trained, whilst their forwards showed that they could play a driving game when necessary. Their ambition was one of using speed and quick hands to create space for others. A high-paced game with the objective of keeping the ball alive and not allowing the defending team the time and opportunity to set defensive walls. French kicking was generally poor, allowing South Africa to run the ball back at the French. This they did very effectively.

The respective warm-ups typified for me the differences between the attitudes of the two sides:

- South Africa were structured and drill orientated.
  - They worked on fast feet and pace organisation with ladders and hurdles in strict patterns.
  - Handling was done in groups of 5. They went one way with simple hands then turned and came back with three attackers against two defenders.
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- France worked at low intensity with a main theme being decision-making by the ball carrier when confronted by men holding shields.
  - Working in pairs
  - Then four pairs of shield players were staggered over the fairly narrow playing area. The attackers worked through the shields, reacting to any defensive situation confronting them as the pairs of shield players came up. This was very much a reaction drill for the attackers, who were encouraged to make decisions to beat the four sets of defenders.