

CONES AND POLES

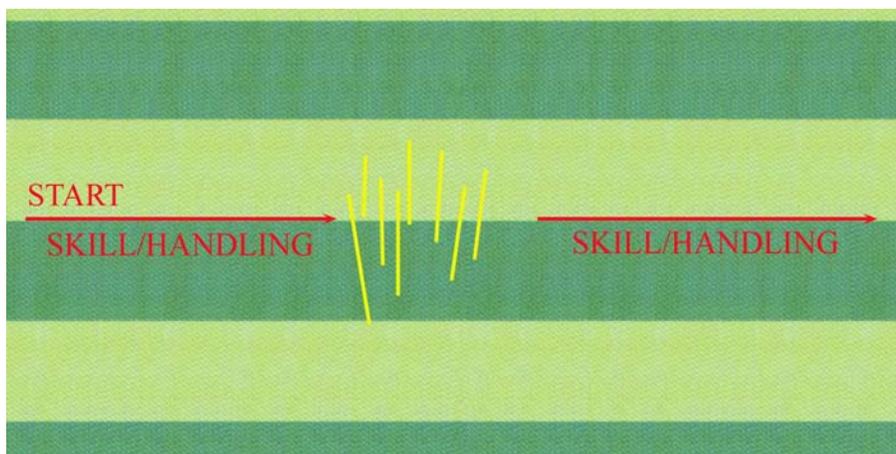
By
KEITH RICHARDSON,
TECHNICAL JOURNAL EDITOR.

Who was the first coach to use the now ubiquitous cone? Who started the indispensable habit of laying out intricate mazes on the pitch? And, most important, where would coaches be without the comfort zone of having a stack of the things at the start of each and every session?

We all use cones and they have various functions. They can be a badge of rank as the coach hands out various tasks to his players pre-training; forwards take out the so-and-so; backs – you will carry the whatsits; but I, the coach, the supreme head of the most important aspect of the session tonight, will cosset and transport the cones. There are occasional variations and they usually take the form of, “Fred, you scored the match-winning try to ensure promotion, performed a gravity-defying tackle to save a score in the final seconds of the game – you may carry out the cones tonight.” You have all been there and done that!

However, it all begs the elementary question: why? Why do we continue to use a coaching aid that fixes players’ gazes on the very place we don’t want them to look – at the ground? The all-singing, all-dancing coaching objective is to get players to see what is in front of them and play accordingly, yet we force them to scan the grass on the pitch most of the time because that is precisely where the cones are!

You may find that this article circles around unconvincingly at times, but I think I know where it is heading so please bear with me. I attended an excellent presentation at the National Academy last season and Brian Ashton was doing some really intense work with his players. It was a stage further on than simple skill work and decision making. The simple layout of what he was doing was this:



The players would work hard on ways to best beat a defence then they would be totally disorientated as they had to run through the poles – and the poles force the players to look up and ahead at what is in front of them. This made sure that they could not get into the comfort zone of guessing their position/place in the next skill work, so they had to play in a position where they ended up on coming out of the poles very much like a game situation where you can not play by numbers. The format is simple enough and you can soon set it up so that there is a skill/activity that leads into the poles then comes out again into a skill/activity. The enterprising coach can add tackles before or after the poles to add to the process of getting players out of a pre-set order of who does what and there is virtually no end to what is possible.

As far as I was concerned the most important comment made by an onlooker was something along the lines of, “That’s new.” Well it actually isn’t and this is where a long memory comes in handy, because my immediate thought was of Maurice Trapp. He had been a Loughborough and Harlequins second row forward who went off to New Zealand. Nothing remarkable there, you might think. However, we next heard of Maurice when he was appointed coach of Auckland. Say it quickly and it does not mean much; start thinking about it and it is enormous as Poms have never loomed large in Kiwi rugby culture. And when you talked Auckland then, you really meant New Zealand. This was in the days before world travel was common and well before Tri-Nations and live television of their provincial games. Auckland were awesome in the amateur era and you hardly saw them so their scarcity value added to their already enormous reputation.

Maurice Trapp was invited to England to give coaching sessions on what he did to develop his Auckland side and he flummoxed us (well, he certainly got to me!) by setting up an area of poles and he introduced a variety of handling and evasion within those poles to develop players’ awareness of space and handling in different situations.

That was the first time that we had seen such reliance on poles as a coaching aid and many of us wondered if we would ever get our groundsman’s permission to use our own resources; remember, this was a long time ago and in those days even the cone was a recent invention!

When I heard the comment at the National Academy, I had to get in touch with Maurice to check out that my memory was as reliable as I thought. It took him about a year and a half to reply but reply he did. It makes for fascinating reading and, though it is certainly not meant as a coaching piece, it does serve that purpose. And here it is:

“About a year and a half ago, you sent me an email asking for further info on some of the coaching sessions that I ran in England in 1991 & 2, (or thereabouts). I never actually deleted your email, as I always intended to reply and now I have got around to it! (Perhaps the fact that the Lions arrive tomorrow and will be encamped at the Auckland Hilton, which is about 60 metres from my office, may have reminded me!).

First of all, I have nothing in writing or on video, diagrams on paper or DVD - or whatever is the latest in technology. Remember, we were still working in the amateur regime!

When I first coached Auckland in 1987, we used the skills and services of Jim Blair, who had previously helped with the Canterbury team and also, following this, with Auckland under John Hart. Jim was the chief designer of the warm-up skills that we worked with and developed over the five years that I coached Auckland.

Jim and I had a wonderful working relationship, possibly strengthened by the fact that we were both ex Phys Ed teachers and also that with my English (Sassenach) heritage, I was able to understand a little more than most of Jim's broad Scottish dialect.

The rugby training sessions that I demonstrated in England were based on a number of observations, beliefs and aims that I had at that time. I will try here to explain and expand on some of them.

- Over the years that I played rugby in the UK and NZ, I learned the most from other players rather than from coaches. I learned skills and techniques from my fellow players within the team I was playing for or from opposition players, perhaps in the bar after a game. (I remember as a schoolboy playing for the Quins up at Northampton on a Boxing Day game where we were given a good drubbing. After the game, in the bar, we were putting down 3-man scrums and performing mini -mauls. I'm not sure whether we spilt any beer, but I know that I learned a huge amount that day.)

Possibly the best coach that I ever had dealings with was Jim Greenwood at Loughborough. What Jim did for us, which was so different from what other coaches did then, was that he provided us with the environment where we could learn from each other. With players like Fran Cotton and John Gray in the front row and backs like Steve Smith, Des Diamond (give him my best wishes!), Dave Cooke and others, this was absolutely the right approach.

I tried to emulate this with the teams I coached in Auckland.

- Remember that top rugby when I was coaching Auckland was still amateur, so we trained on a Tuesday and Thursday night and we were out in the middle of winter when it was cold and wet and when any sensible person would rather be at home beside the fire having dinner rather than performing scrum and line-out drills, rucks and mauls in the pouring rain and freezing cold.

Rugby training needs to be fun as well as invigorating, energising, instructive etc. Without the fun part, players get bored quite easily and, especially in Auckland in the wet, they can tune-out rather than tune-in.

- We used grids, cones, poles and string and created obstacle courses for the players to run through and around and over and under. This formed part of the warm-up and part of the skill sessions that were progressive throughout the season. We attempted to pass and receive passes throughout the session, so that even the props and locks were handling the ball a hundred times before the warm up had finished.

As the session progressed and as the season developed, we increased the intensity, the players made more passes, the spaces between the players decreased and the intensity and pressure increased. Players play the game under pressure and people - their fellow team members and opponents - get in the way. By increasing the intensity of the work we did in our training warm up sessions, we tried to prepare the team for game-like situations.

- Because it was winter and cold and wet, we generally tried to complete our training sessions within an hour. The logic was that if the concentration on the skill session was good, and then we performed, say, scrums and line-outs, some rucking and mauling, the backs ran through some moves and then we put together a twenty minute team run - why prolong things if the players did everything correctly?

Nine times out of ten, if mistakes are being made, it's because the concentration is not there. If the team can't concentrate for sixty minutes, why should they be able to concentrate for 120 minutes? Why perpetuate bad habits?

Having said that, we trained at a far faster pace than most other teams would or could. Whatever the activity, we demanded the highest standards of accuracy and performance. We tried to perform all our activities at a faster pace than we would expect to play the game. The results seemed to pay off!

- As far as actual drills are concerned, we would often design them on the day. I might discuss an area of concern with Jim Blair and we would try to assess the skill components and develop a skill practice around this. It was no different from normal and basic skill training (breaking down a skill into its logical components and then building it up together to the whole). We then added these skill sets into the framework of a rugby team aiming for a championship and we treated each game played as a stepping-stone to the next.

We used and developed the four corner passing drill, where the players assemble facing each other at the corners of a square and perhaps two balls are used with the players running the diagonal lines and passing and, therefore, crossing in the middle. The variations to the drill are enormous, passing left or right, passing

early or late, passing high or low, placing the ball and gathering, expanding the square or contracting it, demanding no contact or complete contact, adding extra balls or placing obstacles within the square.

The intensity of this grid session became an imperative for us. The players would be wound up to a huge intensity with the pace at a maximum and the concentration absolute. Too often today I see the same sessions used, but the intensity, the pace and the accuracy are simply not there. I think that there is little value in performing these sessions at an average pace or poorly.

We also liked to work in a small, tight area, which increases the work pressure and the focus required by the players. Again, this was simply replicating the normal pressure that occurs in a game around the ball or ball carrier.”

So there you have it. Try to incorporate poles more often into your sessions, especially if you are trying to get players to keep their heads up to look at where the opposition might be, even if they are replaced by poles for the practice. And do give careful thought to the role of the cone. If your players are not looking at what is in front of them in a game, you might be the cause of the problem when you get out the cones one more time at training. You might just have conditioned their reflexes in the best possible Pavlovian manner so that they are pre-occupied with the grass on the pitch rather than with the players on it. Then try to remember Maurice Trapp’s words of wisdom on how a session should progress and add the poles; you might just get a more intense session than usual and the players will possibly be looking ahead at the obstacles instead of down at the dreaded cone.