

## **HIT THE GROUND RUNNING –PLANNING YOUR COACHING PROGRAMME.**

**By  
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Welcome to my musings. I hope your club season has gone well and, for those of you who are involved in coaching representative rugby, that your teams are soaring like an eagle. With the work I do for the NZRU I have the great pleasure of getting round this great little country of ours and spending a lot of time with coaches from all levels of the game. I hope I manage to pass on some helpful information from time to time and I certainly learn from everybody I work with – well most of them anyway!

One of the things that has become more apparent to me over time is that many coaches struggle with the programme planning side of coaching. What I mean by that is how to decide what you will be doing with your team in the time that you are in contact with them. Of course your programme will differ depending on the level you are coaching at and the contact time you have with your team. The Under 8s who train one night a week are different from a club side who may come together in January and train twice a week. A Super 12 side's programme is markedly different from that of a trial team whose coaches may have between two and four training sessions before the team plays. Regardless of the players you are coaching, the level they are playing at and the time you are able to spend with them, you need some sort of conceptual template to allow you to decide "why, what, when and how much" you will do with your team from the time you get them until the season is over.

May I humbly suggest a template that I think works pretty well and will hopefully allow you to maximise the effectiveness of your coaching. If you've got all this stuff sussed already, you don't need to read what follows, but if you've ever struggled with it, then you might pick up some ideas. There's a saying I picked up somewhere that goes like this:

*"Every morning in Africa a gazelle wakes up. It knows that this day it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows that this day it must run faster than the slowest gazelle or it will starve. So it doesn't matter whether you're a lion or a gazelle, when the sun comes up you'd better be running."*

It's much the same with your rugby team – your players need to be ready to perform when the first competition game comes along. What I normally do when I sit down with a coach is to ask, “Righto mate, you’ve got 5 weeks (or 8 weeks or 10 weeks) until the first competition game. What do you think you need to do between now and then to ensure that your team “hits the ground running” when the whistle goes to start the first game?” Many of the answers I get go something along the lines of, “Well we’ve got to keep up the fitness work, the guys just aren’t fit enough yet; the passing skills are crap and I’m trying to get the guys to take on board a simple game plan, but some just can’t get seem to get the hang of it.....”. When I ask, “What about the mental side of things; have you appointed a captain yet and how will you decide; what sort of team culture do you want; how will you decide how much time to spend on the game plan and how much on skills?”, I often get blank stares and comments like, “Crikey mate, I’m not too sure,” or, “Dave, you sure do ask a lot of questions”.

I use a rudimentary template that simply lists the key factors that need to be covered then I get a calendar out and ask the coach to start filling in things. Remember that you only have a limited amount of time to spend with your players and you need to use that time the best way you can so your team “hits the ground running.” The key factors of programme development I use are:

- Team culture.
- Leadership.
- Technical.
- Tactical.
- Physical.
- Psychological.

Simply put, I believe that if coaches consider all these aspects and then decide how much of each they need to put time into (and why), when, how and how much of each they need to work on, then they are well down the track of having a coherent plan that will allow them to implement an effective coaching programme for their players. Importantly, it will also allow them to prioritise their coaching focus. Let’s look at each of these factors.

### **Team culture.**

Team culture is simply *the way we do things around here* and refers to the attitudes, values and norms of behaviour that typically exist within the team environment. How you establish your team culture is up to you, but I believe it’s important to be proactive rather than just letting it happen. If you have a team of mature, self-reliant players, you may need to do very little here, but you will at the very least want to clearly establish ‘the way we do things around this team.’ You’ll want to lay down any ‘non-negotiables’ you have and then decide what other values you wish the team to live by. How much you tell them and how much you leave up to them will depend on your approach and the nature of the players you are coaching.

If you wish the players to take some ownership of the attitudes and values, it may be a good idea to organise a meeting of your senior players (the captain, vice-captain and those player who you identify as informal leaders), outline your vision for the team, what attitudes and values you wish to see established and then let the group know that you would really like their help in creating and normalising these values. When you run your attitudes and values session (if you do), you can then split the players into groups, ensuring there is at least one senior player per group, and then ask the players to come back to you with what they think should be the core values of the team. The senior players will be able to guide their group towards the values that you have previously agreed upon with them and the other players will feel that they have at least had some input into the values and will be more likely to feel some ownership of them. If your team is a mature one, then you may feel confident letting the team go through the process on its own. Another technique is to write words (representing what you think are suitable values) on the board, and ask the players to select what they think are the five most important ones.

### **Leadership.**

Clearly you'll want to get the leadership situation sorted out in the team, so you'll need to get that established and bedded-in pre-season if you possibly can. You may need to wait and observe for a while before you make your mind up on your captain, but ideally the captain should be chosen early enough so that he or she can get comfortable with the team and vice-versa. You may also want to identify other leaders in the team, both leaders of team culture and also *playing leaders* (e.g. a leader of lineouts, a leader of defence) and let them know what their roles are. You'll need to plan this.

### **Technical.**

What sort of work will you want to do on players' skills? First you need some sort of skill assessment. You can do this by putting your players through some skill tests, or you can just watch them at training and determine where you think they're at. You only have limited time, so you need to identify the key skills in which you believe your players are deficient, decide how you are going to change and improve these skills, then schedule it and do it. Much of this needs to be individualised, but there may be one skill in which the team is deficient as a group.

Obviously if you're coaching a rep side, you may not think you have too much time to be working on skills, but you may have noticed one aspect of skill (for example, ball presentation or body position into contact) that you consider is so poor that coaching and drilling this aspect will make a significant contribution to team performance and that it's therefore worthwhile focusing on it.

### **Tactical.**

What rugby philosophy do you wish to get across to your players? Clearly you will need to profile your team and decide what sort of game best suits the talent (or lack of it!) that you have. Which patterns of play, game plans and moves will the team use?

What roles do you want the players in each of your positions to fulfil? How will you get this information across to the players? Will you just tell them, or will you get them to contribute to the session, perhaps asking them about the game plans they believe should be used and what their roles should be?

You can ask your mini-units to go away and report back to you with what their roles are, how they can help the other mini-units and how the other mini-units can help them. By doing this you will get valuable insight into their knowledge and their thinking. You'll need to decide how complicated you want to get with your game planning. How much sequencing, if any, will you use? How much structure will you impose versus letting players use their flair? You need to consider what players are already used to previously and how much information you can realistically expect them to take on board in the time you have available. If in doubt, my advice would always be to keep it simpler rather than more complicated.

### **Physical.**

Obviously, strength and conditioning is a critical part of your season's programme. Many senior club teams and most rep teams these days have input from a strength and conditioning professional, but if you don't have access to such a person, then you will be providing this for your players. You need to have a clear plan for your players' conditioning, starting from when you first get the players to pre-season training, right through the season. At elite level, plans are put in place for twelve months of the year.

This is not my area of expertise, but I would make one comment. Use the traditional *gut-buster* sparingly with your players. A real tough session where players run till they drop does have some advantages in terms of shared pain and team-building as identifying toughness, but in general you should try wherever possible to combine conditioning with skills and decision-making drills. In this way your players will get fit while having fun, improving their skills and their option-taking and not even realising that they are getting fit! Remember also that many of your players will not get enough conditioning from your training and games and will need to do extra, especially big forwards. Your programme should take account of this.

### **Psychological.**

This is another aspect that requires ongoing time and effort, but at the least you'll want to find out if your players are happy with how things are going and that there are not any pressing issues (on or off-field) that could interfere with optimal performance. You may wish to get them to fill out a simple psychological performance profile form that asks them how they rate themselves across some key areas. It might be a good idea to outline the importance of mental toughness (especially the importance of appropriate focus at all times) during the season and illustrate what it is and how it is demonstrated.

This all sounds like a hell of a lot of stuff to be doing, but I just want you to realise the things you need to consider when planning your season. At least if you have a

template to work from, you are able to assess what is the most important factor to be working on at any one time and when you should be working on each aspect. The principles of play are a great way to assess on-field performance – to see what’s going well and what’s not going so well. Equally, if things are going wrong (or even if they’re going smoothly), using the six factors I have identified (team culture, leadership, technical, tactical, physical & psychological) as a template is a sound way of auditing how the team is going generally. At any time in the season, if you ask yourself how the team is going across all those areas and focus on priorities, you’ll be doing yourself and your team a big favour.

I hope the rest of this season goes swimmingly for you and keep up the great work!  
I’ll leave you with a quote from Claude Bernard: *“Man can learn nothing except by going from the known to the unknown.”*