

CHALKIE'S LEGACY? BY GEORGE COOPER

The author is an RFU Level IV coach and Coach Mentor. He coached Crewkerne RFC from 1978 to 1989 where he became one of the youngest Life Members of any club in the country. From there he coached Bridgwater & Albion RFC for six years before moving to his home town club of Ivel Barbarians RFC where he coached the 1st XV to three promotions into SW 2 East. He currently assists Mike Davis, the ex England coach, at Sherborne RFC and coaches at the Yeovil College Rugby Academy.

I miss Chalkie White. The last time I saw him was in his home in Wellington, Somerset, in 2002 with Doris his wife. It was meant to be a fleeting visit, but as old mementos were recovered from dusty drawers, it became an extended stay. The telephone rang during the visit. David Shaw was contacting Chalkie to inform him that he was to receive a 'Lifetime Achievement' award for all his work as a track-suit coach and technical administrator. He touched the lives of many of us, particularly in the South West, since his appointment as Regional Technical Director in 1982. His great anthems were always eloquently stressed at the Rugby Class coaching courses at Taunton School or at the many events in which we were present as support coaches. Many future international players passed through our ranks during those weeks. Some, who are now in the twilight of their Premiership careers, may be rather perplexed to know that we were not paid.

“George, never forget that we should all begin from the starting point that we are custodians of the game. Always leave a club in a better position than when you first found it. Remember, it is a vehicle which facilitates the opportunity to become a better man.” This was Chalkie's belief and he would be impressed with the enormous strides made by the RFU in relation to Coach Education, Mentoring and Tutor Training. The RFU lead the world in this respect. But.....there may be no Community game left for all of this coach progress to work in.

Chalkie's thoughts were not modern 'soundbites' or throwaway lines; he meant what he said and was never slow to remind you if your standards ever looked like slipping below what he expected. Criticism was, however, fair and justified. Praise was sincere and all the more powerful because of his integrity. The thought of spin-doctors being involved in the game would have absolutely appalled him. I remember very clearly a weekend in Plymouth where a few of us from the South West were helping him run an old Preliminary Award Course at Marjons Teacher Training College in 1990. In the early hours over a few beers and a curry, he held court over a captivated throng which included Frank Butler [Bath Academy], Pete Johnson [Bristol Academy] and me. His vision of rugby in the next century was prophetic. His view that rugby would become professional was not new, but he quickly placed meat onto the bones of his subject stating that players

would wear enhanced padding and protection as the game evolved into a high impact sport. An extreme nightmare scenario was rugby mirroring American Football, where a few players and teams would be watched by thousands of spectators. He pronounced that the amateur game would become a totally different entity with its own set of laws and refereed in a different mode to the professional game. The problem would arise in the grey areas where the divisions between the two games became blurred. If the division remained blurred, then the pure amateur game would die out completely. From there he recounted many tales from old campaigns with Leicester. His one particular memory was of Paul Dodge being first to training in the week following England winning the Grand Slam in 1980. "I will never forget that moment. Paul's egoless integrity was the embodiment of everything I believed in."

So where is the modern game in terms of ethical integrity and ethical standards? I see several main problems at present: -

1. League Rugby and the Community game.

- i. There is far too much money passing hands in the Community game. There are many examples of businessmen wanting to exercise their ego by throwing money at clubs at Level 5, 6 and 7. I have been told that this is just 'market forces' at work. The application of that 1980s' economic policy to the rugby world is inexcusable. These moneymen are no more than the pimps of the Community game. Some clubs are becoming so powerful that the metaphorical level playing field resembles the side of Mount Everest. The eighty point drubbings in April do not serve any real purpose in the game. As a coach you want to be judged in a competitive environment, but not one in which the dice are totally loaded before the season begins.
- ii. Players change clubs and follow the clubs who pay the dirty dollar in the Community game.
- iii. Too many young coaches are avoiding the club scene, as they know it involves a lot of hard work with only intrinsic rewards. Some coaches are following the 'power squads'. Young coaches must be able to understand that the effectiveness of their coaching may be inflated by being involved with overtly talented players in relation to the league they find themselves in.
- iv. A lot of young players who have come through Development Squads are giving up the game early and want to coach. There may not be a game left to coach in ten years time.
- v. There are too many overseas players in the game. A few in clubs is fine, but perhaps we have come to a moment in time where overseas players can form

- vi. Barbarians XV's and compete in the leagues. These players, in all seriousness, inflate the standard of the leagues in the Community Game. In many leagues, there are 'stand out' clubs who give out eighty point thrashings in the second half of the season. Some other club committees then feel forced to follow suit and look overseas for talent in order to preserve the sacred cow of league status.
- vii. Some clubs are existing and developing as the 2nd XV's of League 2 and 3 clubs. How does playing against a host of Hong Kong 7s experts at Levels 6 and 7 develop young players nurtured after ten or twelve years of junior rugby by hordes of volunteers? Before the riposte that it is great experience for those players, this is not why clubs recruit in such scenarios. It gives jam today and destroys the long-term fibre of a rugby club. When the ex-elite players at Levels 6 and 7 retire, who picks up the pieces? What kind of club will they leave behind?
- viii. Get rid of the leagues now! Are leagues below Level 5 necessary any more? Could someone please justify the necessity in the amateur game to travel a hundred and fifty miles in order to play a game of league rugby? Many clubs have found that promotion has led to disaster with the stresses and strains of travelling and playing against teams laced with boot money. Players will inevitably fall out of love with the game and stop playing. There are numerous tales of some clubs not socialising with the opposition after games and even conducting their post-match affairs totally separately. Why not re-introduce cross county merit tables and a host of cups from Senior to Junior to Plate and Shield competitions, as well as local floodlit competitions? This would retain the competitive spice in the game. Clubs would be successful *as a result of their youth policies*; in some seasons, club A would be top dog and in others it would be their rivals, B, – just as it was in the old days. The differential between the Professional and Community game would therefore be defined. Clubs would have to apply to join, say, a Level 5 set up.
- ix. The model of Bristol is an ideal one in developing real relationships between the Professional and Community games. Bristol has re-established the decades-old relationship between the local clubs and themselves. The players eat and socialise with the supporters because they want to. Players coach at the local junior clubs and keep in contact with their community in real terms. The playing of fixtures on a Sunday gives all those playing on Saturday a chance to see their role models. The buzz in the city was epitomised by the 10,000 gate for the visit of Exeter in the 2004 – 2005 season. In France, Biarritz have an almost symbiotic relationship with the Pays Basque area, which includes fifteen other clubs. The professional players have a real affinity with the public and do not resent having to spend time with those

who pay their wages. Some English club professionals would not be able to understand this process.

2. Schools and Youth Rugby

- i. Many people in the game are not comfortable with the growing tendency for promising players to end up in one Development Centre. Whilst the “Old Boys” network of the Public Schools’ system was accused of shutting out the State Schools, we cannot replace one corrupt system with another. If between fifty and eighty players end up in one Academy Centre, are they all getting games? Have the Academies, by their very existence, reduced the number of State Schools playing the game? Do the Academies still have contact with the junior clubs from which the players came? More importantly, will they still be playing the game if they do not make it at the ‘elite’ level? Will these youngsters put anything back into the game? We also have to acknowledge that the County U16 scene is observed by a multitude of Public School teachers, ready with the promise of scholarships in order to boost their own XV’s. Unfortunately, the number of State School 1st XV’s has been decimated due to muddled educational initiatives, which are epitomised by a government target-setting bureaucracy. The modern, mean-spirited State School senior management teams are often incapable of seeing team sport as a unifying and spiritual hub of the school.
- ii. I had personal experience of taking a fairly weak College team to play north of Gloucester in 2003. There was no-one there to greet us. We had been delayed on the motorway and were late. At pitch-side we were told we were being given two minutes to warm-up as the home side were honed to perfection and raring to go. What is happening to the old standards of etiquette in the game? Young coaches in Academies may, but possibly may not, be given the guidance that we had had from the likes of Chalkie. Some young coaches get a lot of success because they have all the top players in one place, but have these coaches done any kind of apprenticeship? Has success come all too quickly? Hammering a side by sixty points in a mis-match leaves a sour taste in the mouth if one was expecting to meet that organisation’s 2nd XV. It can destroy the confidence of youngsters and, worse, can also be downright dangerous. Luckily, the RFU’s Mentoring System is now supporting coaches and good Academy set-ups address these situations if they happen.

3. Running rugby?

The Community game copies the style of its professional role models. The Premiership is becoming more dominated by ‘Bosh’ rugby and ‘one hit, recycle, hit, recycle.....kick a penalty’ pattern of play. The injuries occurring as a result of this development are becoming too numerous to be acceptable. The game does not *have* to be played like this; the obsession with the gain line has created a beast that appears to be unmanageable. This situation possibly results from the fear of losing and its associated relegation, but what is happening to basic skills? There is a growing development where ex-professional players go straight into coaching in the Premiership and thus perpetuate such a style of play. It may be possible that the modern player will only be prepared to be coached by ex-professional players. Coaching is an art to be developed, a stand-alone academic pursuit and the arrival of the new RFU Level 5 course is an example of this. Let us hope that Bristol and Sale continue to play fifteen man rugby and do not get consumed by this cancer in the game. The sublime rugby of Toulouse shows that ball skills and off-loading before as well as after contact creates space.

The growing tendency for ex-players to be fast-tracked into professional club coaching merely perpetuates a narrow vision of how the game should be played. How many coaches understand how to create space and attack it?

4. Falling ethical standards

There are many excuses for poor ethical and moral standards in the modern game, the main get-out clause being cited as, “Well, the game’s gone professional hasn’t it!”

The professional game will look after itself, but woe betide the day if the Community game dies out. The shimmering, fuzzy partition between the professional and amateur game must be clearly illuminated. Twickenham may still be overflowing as the post-World Cup euphoria fills the stadium against minor international teams in the autumn, but what happens if nouveau rugby fan diverts their ‘attention deficiency’ concentration span to the next sport? It is no pleasure to sit next to ‘gurning’ spectators who spend the afternoon playing with their mobile phones, booing the opposition and getting up and down every five minutes. It really does not hold any appeal for the real rugby fan. Perhaps Ritalin, the iconic

behavioural crutch of 21st century parenting, should be handed out at the gates to HQ before the multitudes of corporate hospitality aficionados devour their pre-match prawns. Will the Community game still be there to watch their professional role models in the future? Or will we end up with a small number of professional teams being watched by 'here today, gone tomorrow' spectators?

We all need to act now, before the amateur game dies.