

COOL HEAD, CLEAR HEAD – WATCHING YOUR GAME WITH PURPOSE

BY

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Watching your team play a game of rugby as a coach can elicit a range of emotions. This can span from elation to despair, from excitement to dread, from fist pumping to holding your head in your hands. But I believe that coaches need to learn to keep their emotions in check during a game for a number of reasons. Firstly because if you don't role model emotional control, how can you realistically expect your players to demonstrate it. If you, the coach, are shouting and waving your hands about, you can't really complain if your players chip the referee, sledge the opposition or lose *their* cool. Secondly, because allowing yourself to become overly emotional will, for most coaches, negatively affect the ability to make effective decisions. Unless you retain some sort of composure, it's quite difficult to think clearly and analytically during games and that is just what your team needs you to be doing.

I'm not suggesting you all need to sit or stand there like statues, but I am saying that you do need to stay in control to make good decisions. Over the years, I have seen many coaches at various levels fail to control their emotions, and I believe it has nearly always been to the detriment of their team. Even those who do have control over their emotions need to ask themselves what they are achieving by constantly shouting advice to their players. Sure, I know why you are doing it – to give your players information that they aren't smart enough, or experienced enough, to know about. But what are you really achieving? Your player is trying to focus on the game and the cues he should be looking out for, like space, defenders, the ball etc, so his attention is unlikely to be focused on the coach, nor should it be. By shouting advice to the player then, you are distracting him from his correct focus, and you are also drawing his (and his opposition's) attention to the fact that he's not doing the right thing or doesn't know what he should know. I'm not saying that your advice may not be timely, or pertinent, but I do ask you to think about how and when you give it. Players of all ages need to learn by experiencing, without a stream of advice from the sideline. I know it's human nature to want to offer it, but think about who you're doing it for – you, or the benefit of the players? Often, I believe coaches do it because

it makes them feel better, not necessarily because it helps the players. I know, because I've been guilty of it in the past!

One of the strategies I have encouraged some coaches (normally at senior level) to use is to beg, buy, steal or borrow a pair of “walkie talkies”, sit up in the stand and then talk to his (or her) manager or assistant coach on the sideline. I'm not suggesting that the coach of the Waikikamukau under 9s should do this, but hopefully you'll get my drift. Sitting up in the stand with a modern communication device has a key advantage for the “emotional” coach; it distances you physically from the action and will help you to distance yourself emotionally. If you “blow a foofoo valve”, at least you will be far enough away from your players that it will have little negative effect on them. The second advantage for all coaches sitting in the top of the stand is that you are able to see the game from a different perspective. With a bit of height, you will see patterns and factors emerging that you cannot see from the sideline and neither can your players see it from on the field. You can really help your team by providing them with these strategic insights. Some coaches (especially back coaches) like to watch the game from behind the dead-ball line for similar reasons. If you are able to, give it a try.

Anyway, having got that off my chest, I will now come to the main point of this article and that is to offer some suggestions as to how you might be able to think about the game while it is being played and to provide your players with feedback on the game and their performances in it. Firstly, I would like to provide you with a simple, yet effective, conceptual method of analysing your team's performance. It's not rocket science, it's based on the principles of the game and it will give you a sound template for assessing what's good, bad and ugly about the performance of your team. Hopefully this simple system may ring a bell with those of you who haven't been coaching for too long (and maybe even some of you who have!).

According to the gospel of the NZRU, there are five fundamental principles to successful rugby, no matter what the level at which you are coaching. These are: (1) obtain and maintain *possession* of the ball, (2) *go forward*, (3) *support* the ball carrier, (4) maintain *continuity* by keeping the ball available and (5) maintain constant *pressure* on the opposition (both on attack and defence). What I am suggesting here, is that these principles provide a wonderful template for you to assess how well your team is going, both at half time and after the game.

These are the five key principles of the game. Firstly your team has to have the ball (***gain & maintain possession***) to be able to do something with it – this involves winning the ball from set phases - making sure that your lineout and scrum are working effectively, that you are winning the ball from kick-offs and that you are competing for the ball in contestable phases. These contestable phases include scrums (to a lesser extent) and lineouts, but more particularly, rucks and mauls and at the tackle. It also involves keeping the ball when you have it, through effective ball retention methods.

Going forward is simply moving towards the opposition's goal-line, bearing in mind that the objective of the game is winning by scoring points. So the thing to bear in

mind here is how well your team is doing in terms of moving towards the target zone. It's not that effective if your players are doing all sorts of fancy stuff behind the advantage line, the question is how well are they doing in terms of taking the ball forward. It's OK to go backwards or sideways, if the end result is going forward. Do you have players running straight? Are they moving inexorably towards the opponent's goal-line, whether quickly, or more slowly?

Supporting the ball carrier is crucial if you wish to go forward. When a player's progress is halted, supporting players are needed to be able to take the pass and continue the attack. Some questions to ask here are: are your players supporting the ball carrier quickly enough; are they supporting with depth; are they communicating; are they making themselves available through effective positioning?

Continuity is about maintaining the attack. Clearly, effective support play is important to continuity, but so are running effective lines; recognising and using space; and efficient ball recycling when a tackle, ruck or maul takes place (which necessitates sound body position into contact and good ball presentation). So ask yourself if your players are performing these functions effectively.

Maintaining ***pressure*** is important both on attack and defence. On offence, this is about attacking clear weaknesses, or attacking in such a way that you create weaknesses whether through mismatches (e.g. backs running at tight forwards) or through creating space through your attack by committing defenders elsewhere. On defence, pressure is created by having an effective and efficient defensive system which your players understand and adhere to. It's about making first up tackles and continuing to make them. It's about cutting down your opponent's time and space by sound, pressurising defence. So again, ask yourself how well your team is adhering to these principles of pressure, both on attack and on defence.

Now while this is probably old hat to most of you and I include it here not primarily to remind you of the key principles of play, but to alert you to the fact that understanding these principles provides you with a great starting point to assess your team's performance. Based on how well your team has performed the principles of play, you can give clear, useful advice at half-time as to what your players need to do in the second half and also use the template as a means of assessing the performance when you come together for next week's first training. You may have a sheet of paper which looks something like this and allows you to make notes during the game. *Note: with the 1-5 scale, 1 = really bad, 2 = poor, 3 = average, 4 = good and 5 = very good.*

| Match analysis sheet | | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------|
| Date: | Opposition: | | |
| | 1st half | 2 nd half | Comments |
| Obtain & maintain possession | 1 2 3 4 5 | 1 2 3 4 5 | |
| Go forward | 1 2 3 4 5 | 1 2 3 4 5 | |
| Support of ball - carrier | 1 2 3 4 5 | 1 2 3 4 5 | |
| Continuity | 1 2 3 4 5 | 1 2 3 4 5 | |
| Pressure on defence | 1 2 3 4 5 | 1 2 3 4 5 | |
| Pressure on attack | 1 2 3 4 5 | 1 2 3 4 5 | |

Just going through this process will force you to think about your team's performance with some purpose and some structure and will hopefully allow you to give the team some sound advice at half-time and at the next training. Post-game, I would also encourage you to allow the players to assess their own performance before telling them what you think. For very young players this may be challenging, but the sooner you can encourage them to start thinking for themselves about their performance, the sooner you will start to produce self-aware, self-reliant players. You can do this by splitting players into mini-units (e.g. tight forwards, loose forwards, inside backs and outside backs) and getting them to score themselves on each principle of play. If they score three or below you can ask them what they think they need to do to put things right for next week. I know there is a temptation when you only have your players for a short time twice a week to want to get straight out on the field and start running around, but a small amount of time spent with players reflecting on their performance can pay large dividends.

So, if you can (as Rudyard Kipling said) "keep your head when all about you are losing theirs"; if you can watch your team's game with a clear purpose, a purpose that is primarily to provide your team with the best possible information at half-time and post-game; and if you can clearly and effectively share this information with your

players in a way that they can take it on-board and use it to enhance optimal performance, then you will be doing your players a huge service.