

## COACHING *HOW TO PLAY*

BY

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“The coach believed that the ball was the inevitable requisite for acquiring facility *with* the ball. We trained hard but he always gave us a ball and in a game situation we were sufficiently practised in handling to keep mistakes to a minimum. *With that confidence we were free to express our ability, free to handle the ball from our own line, free to attack from any situation on the field that offered us the possibility of doing so.*”

This is a philosophy and an approach to the game that is healthy and attractive but, above all, efficient and successful. Players are encouraged to be aware of attacking options *anywhere* on the field. Indeed, an effective player is the individual who considers all possibilities open to him. His mind is active and, with the ball in his possession, he is alert to *any attacking opportunities*. The directive of “play in their half” in essence means that the opposition has the luxury of only having to defend half of the pitch. This can’t be right!

I don’t believe in reinventing the wheel .....the earlier quotation, made in 1971, is by Mike Gibson, former Ireland and British Lions Centre and the coach in question was Carwyn James. The students I currently coach were not born then nor even were the coaches I work with, but the philosophy and the gospel of attacking rugby still rings true today. However, it is a total misapprehension to believe that attacking rugby is to run everything from everywhere. I am not an advocate of irresponsible running as the whole game often collapses into a rather “frayed game of

basketball”. Mike Gibson stated that he supported “responsible speculation” and I concur wholeheartedly. The coaching process needs to encourage “freedom with discipline as a philosophy of play” (Brian Ashton).

This season I have attended two Under 19 rugby tournaments and what struck me was firstly the physical size of the young forwards but also, sadly, the lack of adventure and creativity in their play, both in these forwards and the backs. Too many teams sought comfort and safety in the driving lineout and on a forward orientated game. These young players did not play instinctively and were too mechanical in their approach. Indeed, too often coaches are willing to accept a minimum requirement to achieve success and these young men played within their own limits. But who’s at fault? Players, coaches, teachers? Certainly it is the coaches and teachers who can stimulate and influence the necessary changes in behaviour, approach and mind set of young rugby athletes.

As a former professional coach, I am fully aware of the need for a victory on a Saturday. It may be argued that the basis of any successful side over a long season lies initially in the strength of the front five, coupled with an unyielding defence and so often an accurate goal kicker. Few sides succeed without these criteria. At the very least it will make the team a difficult side to beat. However, it is necessary to get the correct balance in the playing strategy ..... the balance between a kicking and a running game, between attacking through the forwards or the backs ..... But an attacking philosophy must be an integral part of the armoury, with sides willing and looking to attack from anywhere on the pitch.

Too often I have heard the cry from coaches and supporters alike that the Premiership league should dispense with the relegation system as it promotes a safety-first approach and dour rugby. I do not subscribe to the belief that the fear of relegation restricts creativity. Even in a “ring fenced” Premiership there would be other pressures, such as European qualification. All coaching positions carry a degree of pressure. As previously stated, coaches are too often willing to accept the minimum standard in skilful play to achieve success. Winning is important of course, but

winning in style should be the aim. Villepreux referred to the game being spectacular and yet efficient. However, in this new professional era, coaching seems to standardise when it should be encouraging style and personality to prosper at the expense of a more rigid discipline.

It must be remembered that the game belongs to a number of stakeholders – players and coaches obviously, referees, but equally as important are the spectators, media and sponsors. A spectacular and yet efficient game must be the objective. This is how Villepreux used his description of “efficient”, because a spectacle, even the best spectacle, cannot replace a win. An example of such rugby was the Grand Slam success of Wales 2005, which was spectacular, efficient and bold. The England teams in the earlier years of the new millennium certainly extended boundaries. Both were totally entertaining and managed to be successful at the same time.

To encourage and develop a dynamic, entertaining game means organising the training sessions to reflect game situations .....to organise small sided games, even leading to fully opposed sessions. The more pressure there is, the better. The aim is to improve “game awareness” .....for players to recognise similarities and patterns in the game. Each game situation is unique, but the players must be able to react intuitively to certain cues. Coaches should introduce innovative game situations in their practices. Players must look at what is happening in front of them. Make them look at the constantly changing environment and allow them to respond and react accordingly. There is, of course, a place for small conditioned skill sessions such as 2v1, 3v2 etc, but immediately a coach calls for a certain formation/activity (i.e. 2v1, 3v2 etc) the critical decision of recognising this situation is taken away from the player. Players must look! Players must be able to adapt to the constantly changing, playing environment. How else can players develop this skill other than in game-like situations? In a quick dynamic game, defences become disorganised and players must look, assess and intuitively react in order to exploit the advantages of facing a disorganised defence.

Furthermore, during video analysis, players can be questioned on the decisions they made in the game ..... “What did you see?”, “What did you do?” and “What else could you have done?” are some of the relevant questions. Developing the players’ awareness in a game situation is similar to an advanced driving test where drivers are encouraged to observe and mentally record everything within their vision.

I believe it was an American Basketball Coach who said that the team who makes most mistakes will probably win the game. Indeed, there is much truth in this statement if you analyse it properly. Players who create will take risks and may make mistakes, but these are the very people who make things happen (“the doers”). Graham Henry always encouraged his players to be bold. Players must have the courage to make decisions. The coach must coax, cajole, or stimulate his players into “making things happen”.

As I suggested earlier, there is a need to practise with opposition and there is a need to organise the game-like situation in all training sessions.

Jose Mourinho, the Chelsea manager, got close to it when he stated that, “The pianist doesn’t run around the piano or do push ups with the tips of his fingers. To be great, he plays the piano. He plays all his life and being a great footballer is not about running, push ups or physical work generally. The best way to be a great player is to play football”.