

# PLAYER-CENTRED COACHING BY PETER STEINBERG.

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USA Rugby has revamped the Coach Development Program (CDP) over the last year. There has been a lot of discussion on the new format, the online modules, the coaches' portal, IRB equivalency etc. All of these have added credibility to our program. (For information, if a coach holds a level 1, 2 or 3 from the old program, it is still valid, but will eventually expire in August 2008). What is not widely discussed is the new coaching approach that the CDP has adopted – player-centred coaching. Over the next few months in the USA, I will highlight what a player-centred coach does and how he can go about coaching different aspects of the game, but for the purposes of this article for the Technical Journal I will deal with the introduction of the tackle.

Player-centred coaching is not a new approach to coaching rugby, but it has not been widely practised in the USA. It is something that has had more prominence in the international coaching community over the last few years and is now being adopted by the traditional rugby countries. It has been the basis of the French way of coaching for a long time. Wayne Smith, the All-Blacks' assistant coach, is a strong proponent of the player-centred approach that he learned from the French. (This is a shameless plug – you can read some excerpts of an interview with Wayne Smith and his approach at the CDP portal <http://usarugby.learn.com> – subscription required). I believe that a player-centred approach is vital in developing the American rugby player because it mitigates one of the biggest challenges our players have, lack of playing experience, by accelerating the players' understanding of the game.

So what is player-centred? It is one end of a coaching style continuum, the other end being coach-centred.



A good coach moves up and down this continuum, dependent on the needs of his or her players. However, the coach should work towards becoming more player-centred with the team.

Being player centred requires three components:

- player leadership
- questioning
- games

Player leadership requires the coach to empower his team to make decisions both on and off the field. Questioning, often the most difficult of the three components for the coach, means that the coach must guide players to the correct answer and not just tell them what to do. The final component, games, requires the coach to teach skills within the context a game, allowing the players to develop skills under pressure. Therefore, the coach needs to be creative in making practices that include as many games as possible.

Now let's get down to the business of coaching. We'll take a skill which requires good technique and we will coach it in a player-centred way.

### Coaching Defence.

Please note that we are coaching defence and not just tackling. In my coaching practice, I used to spend a lot of time on tackling but not a lot of time on defence, i.e. who should be tackled. The player-centred approach works on both. Obviously, tackling is a huge safety concern so we need to be progressive. This example will focus on coaching defence to players who have never before played rugby.

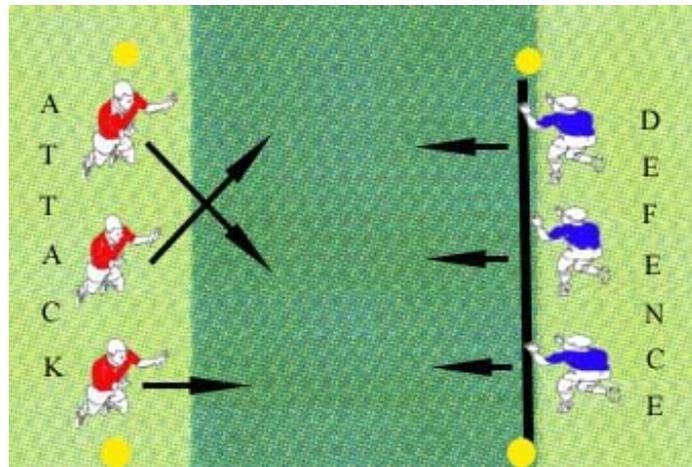
It is important when introducing anything to a player that we give the player some context before we introduce the skill or technique. This is especially true for players that have never before played the game. This means for defence, the players need to play defence before they learn how to tackle. The initial defensive game needs to be non-contact. In this case, I am going to introduce a few concepts with a touch game that will give the players some idea how to play defence. We will focus on three fundamentals of defence:

- defensive line advancing together
- one person, one tackle
- channel defence

### Playing Defence.

Three attackers face three defenders, each along opposite sides of a ten metre by ten metre grid. When the attack is ready, they attempt to run to the other side of the grid without being touched. The goal of the defence is to make sure each defender touches one attacker – one player, one tackle. The defence can move as soon as the offence moves

and the offence can do what ever they want with loops, switches etc.



This is a ‘game’ – there is opposition and there is a way to win. The coach could leave the players alone and they would work out how to play defence on their own given enough time. The use of questioning can accelerate that process. Here is an example of how questioning might work:

Coach: What happened?

Player: I couldn’t get to the attacker to touch him.

Coach: Where did the player run?

Player: Into the hole between me and my teammate.

Coach: What caused the hole?

Player: I was behind my teammate.

Coach: How can you close the hole?

Player: I need to be in line with my teammate.

The coach can vary this game in many ways but should end up with a 3 v 3 game that includes a ball. This will encourage the players to communicate but it should remain one person one tackle. The coach can also introduce the concept of taking a side away from the attack by starting on one side of them rather than always from the centre.

### Tackling.

Once the concept of defence has been introduced, the skill of tackling can be taught. I will suggest a slightly unconventional approach to developing tackling skills, but I believe it makes players safer in contact during rugby games. It starts with developing good body position in contact.

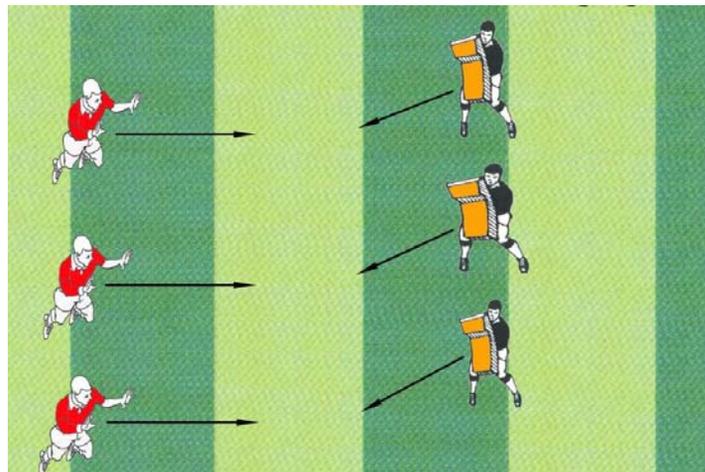
Again I will coach within the context of a game and I want the players to be aware of their body position. In this case I will ask players to pair up according to body type. The

pairs will line up facing each other on either side of the goal line with their hands on their partner's shoulders. The object is for each player to push his partner backwards and he will win when his feet cross the goal line. To make it really competitive, put a ball in the middle and ask them to drive over it.

Instinctively, many players will get into good body position (flat back, hips below shoulders, head up) because this is a biomechanically strong position. It is important that players begin to understand what good body position is and the coach can facilitate this understanding through questioning.

Once there is awareness of good body position, the hitting aspect of tackling can be introduced. It is often beneficial to use tackle shields or body suits to allow players to hit aggressively. When using tackle shields make sure they are thin enough to allow players to wrap. Remember, the more game-like you can make this the better, so I would suggest doing this in groups of three rather than as individuals.

Three players holding pads are matched up opposite three tacklers. The coach can manipulate the defenders to be 'inside' the pads so that they are hitting with one shoulder and getting their 'head behind'. The attackers run straight ahead with the pads and the defenders hit and drive them straight back (but not to ground).



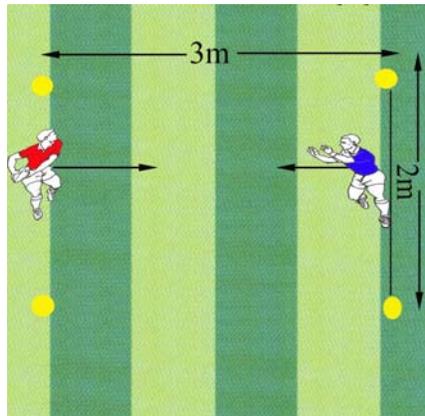
In this game I would focus on three things for the tacklers:

- getting the feet close to the pad before contact
- making sure the head goes to the side
- hitting with the shoulder and driving through the bag

Of course, players should also be focusing on good body position in contact, coming up together, and communication.

The players are now ready to complete the first part of the tackle – the hit and the drive. I like to have the players play one on one on a very small 'rugby pitch' to introduce this.

The rugby field is two metres by three metres, reducing the attacking options and intensity of the hit. The attacker (with a ball) and the defender stand on opposite goal lines. The attacker's goal is to score and the defender's goal is to prevent this. The defender can win by driving the attacker backwards or by knocking him out of bounds. The defender is not asked to complete the tackle. This can be very intense, so make sure you manage the number of hits each player makes.



As this is a 'game' the coach does not have to intervene but can encourage the players to think about how they can win. The players will eventually work out how to win without the coach's help, but targeted questioning can facilitate this process. Here is an example of dealing with a common issue in this game: the defender starts in the middle, thereby allowing the attacker to go to either side.

Coach: What's happening?

Player: I can't get a good hit on her.

Coach: What is she doing that's making it difficult?

Player: She's jinking and I don't know which shoulder I'm going to hit with.

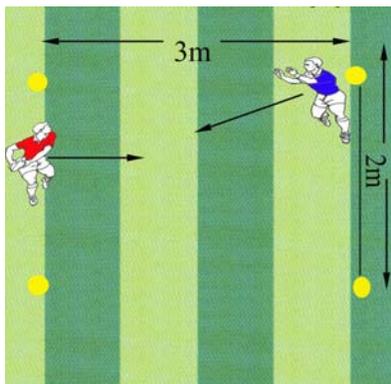
Coach: Is there a way that you can make her go one way?

Player: Yes, if I start on one side she has to run to the other.

Coach: Great, so where should you start?

Player: I should start on one corner.

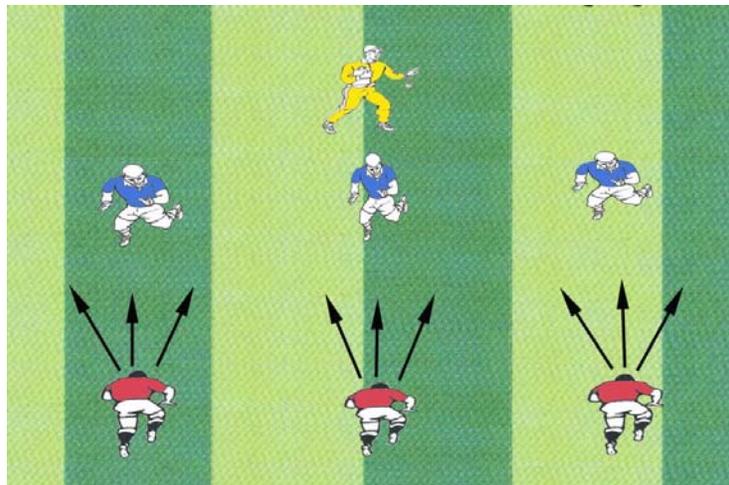
Coach: Good, why don't you give that a try?



Before we move on to the full tackle, we must teach the ball carrier how to take the tackle and fall down safely. Falling down is something that requires practice to ensure that the ball carrier is safe and doesn't use a hand to cushion the blow. A coach can simply have players fall down on the hard parts of the body (knees, hips, back of the shoulder), making sure that there are always two hands on the ball. It is also important that players stress their necks to prepare for the contact with the ground.

One more practice might be useful before we can get the players to play defence. Decision-making without the ball is as important as decision-making with the ball. Most good defensive systems are designed to force the attack to go one way and therefore predetermine what kind of tackle will be made. But defensive systems are not perfect, so players must be able to adjust to making different types of tackles. This simple practice is designed to encourage the player to make a decision about what kind of tackle they should execute – head on or side on – as well as to finish the tackle and regain possession of the ball. This is also an opportunity for the attacker to practise being aggressive in contact. When they are going to be tackled from the side, the attacker should widen his stance so that his legs are difficult to bring together. The attacker should also present his hip to meet the hit with a powerful step.

The players face each other one on one about ten metres apart. Each attacker has a ball and is facing the coach, who stands behind the defenders. The coach will manipulate the attackers to run either directly at the defender or to one side with a signal from behind the defenders. Each defender must decide which tackle he will make, execute the tackle and regain possession of the ball by quickly getting to his feet. You can manage the speed of the ball-carrier and slowly increase to full pace.



The key points emphasized in this practice are:

- getting feet close to the ball carrier before hitting
- wrapping the ball carrier and driving him to ground
- tackler getting up quickly to regain possession of the ball

Now we are ready to go back to the original 3 v 3 grid and have the players play defence, this time with full contact tackling. When you observe the game you will identify what areas need to be worked on again and you can go back to the part of the progression that will meet the players' needs.

**Things to think about:**

- This progression should not be completed in one practice. The coach needs to be aware of the number of shoulder hits that the players are making relative to the season and adjust accordingly.
- Players need good core strength and strong shoulders before they start to do contact. This IS the coach's responsibility, so make sure you have taken some time to get your players strong.
- Coaches are always concerned about the amount of time that they have with their players and most of us will only have about four hours a week. Often coaches will tell me that questioning takes too long. While it does take longer in a practice session, it is a more effective way for players to learn – they are more likely to execute on the field. You may not cover as much, but they will retain and use more.
- While all the questioning examples are one on one, the coach should ask these questions to the group and solicit answers. Most of the players will think about their answer, even if they do not answer you and, therefore, will learn more effectively.
- Part of this progression is very player-centred, some of it is more coach-centred. The trick is to move up and down the continuum as needed.