



Being A Curious Coach By Peter Steinberg

Pete Steinberg is a Game Development Officer for USA Rugby and leads the Coach Development Programme. He is the head coach of the USA Hawks, one of the IRB North American Four Teams. He is also head coach of the Mid-Atlantic Men's All-Star Team, who won the National Championship in 2005, and the Penn State Women's, who have won three National Championships.

Recently I went to watch a team during pre-season. It is nice to go and watch a practice and not have to think about what the players are doing, but think about what the coach is doing. In this case the coach was excited because he had enough forwards to do some live scrumming, often a rarity in the USA. Unfortunately, the excitement took over the session as the forwards ran around the field scrumming with no real purpose. There was certainly a lot of scrumming going on, but was there a lot of learning? I asked one of the players after the practice what the pack had worked on during the scrum session and he could not answer me. To me, all the enthusiasm of the coach was lost because he did not have any specific outcomes in mind and therefore the session, while not worthless, did not have the impact it should have had.

This is the question that keeps me up at night – “How can I be more effective as a coach?” Defining what is effective is critical, and to me there is only one measure of effectiveness – changing players’ behaviour on the field. So the question now becomes; “How do I more effectively change my players’ behaviour on the field?” This is a great question, and if you ask yourself that a lot, then you are what we call at USA Rugby a “Curious Coach.”

The phrase “curious coach” is actually a derivative of “curious rugby player,” which is a phrase Geoff Tanner and I coined when I asked Geoff to come in and do some work with the Penn State Women’s team. Geoff is a Kiwi with a lot of experience in rugby and strategic planning. We had not won the National Championship for three years, despite having National Championship calibre teams, so I asked Geoff to find out why. He did a lot of work with the women in meetings and he found out that, despite all of my questioning, games etc., my players did not think for themselves. Not only that, they were not thinking because of me! I intervened too much. We decided that if we wanted to play “Intelligent Rugby” we would need to create “curious players.” In other words, we had to develop players that were always thinking about how they needed to improve, wanted to understand the game and were always thinking, “what do we need to do to win?”

So I decided to go off the deep end and not coach for a while. I was there, set up the games we played, blew a whistle to start and finish, but I did not intervene. I gave the players the opportunity to think, adjust on their own and learn. All I asked them to do was, “Think about how you can win.” I did this for matches they became far more self-aware and they really took control. I was concerned about new players to the game, but they took to the approach the best and improved the most. It was actually a struggle for the older players, who were used to being told what to do, but even they began to take to the idea of thinking. I have tried to keep an aspect of this approach in all of my coaching to get the players to think, but it is really difficult, especially with teams that you don’t get to spend much time with.

To be a “curious coach”, it is important to get regular feedback and I was very fortunate to have that opportunity when I was coaching the USA Hawks. We had the National Team coaches advising us as well as four observers who came in to watch the team in action. I had some great feedback from Tony Smeeth and Matt Webber, members of the National Team staff, all about how to balance the tactical (games approach) with the technical (drills approach). On the last day, Bernie Hogan (backs’ coach for the Hawks), Marty Wiggins (coach of the Chicago Lions) and I had a great discussion about how to develop teams in these compressed assemblies. Marty was great in giving Bernie and me feedback and other ideas.

Asking for feedback and being “curious” does not mean you don’t know your stuff, or that you are coaching incorrectly. It is just looking for ways to be more effective and opening up to other coaches. Of course the best feedback on your coaching comes directly from your team. I do this during one-on-one feedback sessions; if I can give *them* feedback, they should be able to do the same for me. Others prefer anonymous surveys at the end of the year, but you should always have some feedback mechanism for the players to let you know what you are doing well and what they may want you to do differently.

Curious coaches never end their journey and are always looking for feedback. I have been asked to give feedback to some of the best coaches in the world – Eddie O’Sullivan, Lynn Evans, Mike Luke, Tony Smeeth and Aussie McLean to name a few. It is not because I am a better coach than them, it is because they know that there are many ways to coach rugby and they are curious to know how I might get to the same outcomes.

So this column needs to be more practical than just a philosophical discussion about coaching. It needs to be practical. There are some keys to being more effective as a coach – remember ‘effective’ means changing players’ behaviour on the field. One that I struggle with, but is critical, is focus. Most of us only have our players for four hours a week, which is not much – so being effective is really important. You only know if you are effective if you focus on some specific outcomes. Once you have decided on the outcomes you can plan the practice – in other words, design ways to get to the outcomes. At the end of the practice, you can look at your outcomes and determine if you met them.



Getting to the outcomes should also be a thought-out process and should be linked to how you want your team to play. Here is a way to structure the development of your team and ensure that you cover everything:

- Season focus – how we want to play the game?
- Two to three week focus – what we want to work on now?
- Today's practice focus.

Here is what the structure may look like – page 4:

Season Focus

Principles of Play	Offence	Defence
Possession	Win our ball and move it quickly from set-piece	Disrupt their ball – challenge for possession
Go forward	Attack wide, change directions often	Take three steps up. Defend close first then slide
Support	Work towards the ball in contact, get depth on the ball	Inside the ball needs to be covered with support
Continuity	Stay on your feet and keep ball alive. Ruck is final option	Attack the ball and contest for possession – look for turnovers then move the ball

Three Weeks' Goals

General	Unit	Team
Develop tackle and poaching skills	Forwards Focus on engagement and chase on both offensive and defensive scrums	Play with more width Introduce channel attack from first phase
Improve handling skills	Introduce variations in the lineout	Implement second phase defence
Improve decision-making in contact	Backs Going forward and defence from first phase Countering and covering kicks	

Today's Practice

Monday		Focus
20 min	Warm-up and stretch	20 passes to warm-up
25 min	Channel game	Avoiding the shoulder with footwork, support funnels towards the ball, keep the ball alive in contact. Ruck formed end of repetition.
25 min	Support drill	Break into support drill, working on options in contact, then back to Channel game.
25 min	Split - Forwards Scrums	Work on the hit and then keeping feet on the ground. Focus on pushing down with feet and not back. Work 1v1, 2v2, 3v3, 5v5 and 8v8. Tight binds can be addressed as well.
20 min	Backs – 1 st Defence and countering	Middle 3 defence working on slide defence – communication from inside.
20 min	Play from scrums	Catching the ball and moving the ball away from forwards. Work on attacking scrums in opposition half – play with width. Work on defensive scrums in their half – countering kicks

(Note: The drills listed can be found at the USA Rugby Coaches' Portal)



Each practice should be designed with the two to three week goals in mind, and at the end of that, the coach should look back on how the team wants to play and decide what needs to be addressed next. For each practice session the coach should focus on only one or two areas and stress those. If you use a player-centred approach, and use games in your practice, players will be able to work out many of the other areas, but you want to ensure they improve in your areas of focus.

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