

**DEVELOPING CORE PASSING TECHNIQUES  
WITH YOUNG PLAYERS  
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When considering a topic to write about for the Technical Journal I thought about a number of the different aspects of the role I currently fulfil as Academy Manager at Leeds Tykes. These aspects include periodisation of a player's playing and training programme, the technical and tactical development of an elite rugby player, the use of sports psychology to include mental preparation and coping strategies before and during games, to name but a few. However, having undertaken a previous role as a Community Rugby Development Officer as well as being a volunteer who coaches and watches numerous matches on a Sunday morning, there were two outstanding issues which I feel need to be discussed and addressed before any player becomes involved within an Academy set up. These are the development of coaches within an Academy catchment area and the core skill development of young players.

This article is, therefore, meant to be a discussion document which, hopefully, will stimulate thought about what we are delivering within a club or school environment and how coaching expertise can be utilised to develop better coaches.

What do we want our young players to be able to do? Many coaches will set up drills which will incorporate a number of attackers against a set number of defenders (e.g. 5v3), but what do the players see? I would think that in most cases they would, if asked, say three defenders as opposed to four spaces. How can we, as coaches, change this perception and start to develop their appreciation of space as well as (then) the core skill to take advantage of it. If you look at the table below, which shows the pattern of optimum trainability of young players, players aged between the ages of twelve and fourteen have an excellent capacity to develop spatial awareness. However, most teams at this age would focus on team patterns or organisation rather than a player-centred approach in developing the whole individual; the latter is what underpins the Academy process.

The following chart is one that was created by Istvan Balyi, who is an authority on Long Term Athlete Development. It was used initially to illustrate why the Academy process was needed with three hours a day for ten years. G and E represent *good* and *excellent* regarding a person's potential for improvement at a certain age. The blank areas suggest that any progress will be normal at that time/stage.

Age	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Coordination capacities			G	G	G	E	E				G	E	E	E
Motor learning			G	G	G	G	E				G	G	G	G
Spatial awareness			G	G	G	G	G	E	E	E				
Physical capacities	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Endurance	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
Strength					G	G	G	G	E	E	E	E	E	E
Speed		G	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	G	G	G		

(Scammon, 1930 and Balyi & Hamilton, 1998.)

The development of spatial awareness can also be looked at when we consider the previous scenario of 5v3 activity and how players are trained to take contact. How often would a player be asked to run directly at a tackle shield in order to set up a ruck or maul? Is this not contrary to the idea of identifying space and finding four spaces rather than three defenders? I would also consider the Continuum in terms of what we are asking players to do. At U7 and U8, players are actively encouraged to develop running and handling skills and certainly, as they become more experienced, some are able to identify space in which to attack and the simple decisions of beating defenders 2v1 utilising a simple pass or a switch.

What then do we ask of them at U9? They have now to learn to tackle, ruck, maul and scrummage in addition to passing, running and decision making. In my opinion this is too much and, as a direct consequence, the basic core skills of passing and running are neglected in favour of the technical necessity to coach players to ruck. It is no surprise that rugby league players have more highly developed core skills in running and passing at a younger age than their rugby union equivalents at the same age, as this is all they have to focus on. In my opinion, coaches have to recognise the importance of the long-term approach and not be concerned by short-term victories simply because a team is well drilled in the art of rucking and mauling – or, more commonly, have an early developer who is much bigger or faster than his counterparts.

Previous Technical Journal articles have looked at developing players through modified games and I would wholeheartedly support that. Players learn and develop through playing the game, but can during the game be challenged to think and react according to what they see, learning to recognise the cues or stimuli to make the correct decisions. However, what underpins this is the ability to perform the core skills of passing and catching consistently at pace, under pressure and in a game-related situation.

This brings me on to my second point of the need to develop the coaches who are working with this key group of players. Whilst being involved with the player pathway

for the identification of talented young players, I have had the opportunity to assess the strengths of numerous players and what always strikes me is the need to further develop core passing and catching techniques. Part of the Academy role, as I see it, is in developing talent for the future from an early age. This does not mean that we will start to run sides from U8s as in the Premiership football model, but rather involve ourselves with the development of coaches across the county, as we see this as integral in the future success of the Academy. We are able to provide technical information to the coaches working within the Community game to allow them to transfer this information to the next generation of players. Academy staff have delivered coaching workshops to numerous coaches across the county already this season and will continue to make ourselves available whenever possible. What is often asked for when delivering coaching courses is a drills book, but this is *not* what we deliver. The focus has to be on the philosophy and importance placed even at an elite level on core skills. Game analysis at the Tykes will include statistics on the quality of catch and pass as we feel this underpins the way we are trying to play the game and is integral in producing a quality player. The way in which we can educate and develop coaches is to give them the technical information which they can then utilise when delivering a coaching session using the ‘how to coach’ skills that they have learnt from a coaching qualification course. What we emphasise is how to get the coaches to recognise the importance we place on the development of core passing and catching.

One technical element of passing would be the six o’ clock pass. For the purposes of the article I have included some technical information relating to grip and the technique of this pass. When carrying the ball, hold the middle of the ball with the thumb extended and fingers spread along the ball.



Squeeze the ball hard, particularly with your thumb. This ensures the ball is secure and enables players to pass both ways. An example of a warm-up exercise to test grip would be to have players moving around within a coned area and carrying the ball in the overhand grip; players without a ball try to knock the ball from the hand. This is a simple but effective way of developing grip strength and gauging technique.

The six o' clock pass is also dependent on the catch and the techniques that should be focused on are:

- Thumbs and fingers pointed upwards.
- Focus on the centre of the ball as it arrives.
- Look through the hands, which make a **W** shape, with the thumbs forming the middle.
- Complete the catch with fingers spread around the middle of the ball.
- Catch with 'soft' hands and elbows to cushion the ball.



The player is now carrying the ball safely and can offload quickly to either side without readjusting his hands.

Finally, when delivering the pass, concentrate on:



- Inside elbow up.
- Inside leg forward.
- Thumbs and fingers now pointed downwards.
- *Push* the ball towards the target.
- Follow through with the hands so that they to end up pointing *at* the target.
- The ball should travel without rotation in the air, with the ends of the ball pointing straight up and down. This enables the player to deliver different passes with varying weight and distance. The ball is not spinning, therefore it is easier for the receiver to catch the ball correctly.

There will still be the need for spin passes, but only to deliver the ball over longer distances in the right circumstances.

In conclusion, I believe we still need to focus more attention on the core attributes of catching and passing if we want to be able to develop rugby players to play an expansive game. This requires the support and technical knowledge of coaches from the very earliest ages to recognize the long-term value of this rather than the short-term solution of



winning matches at the expense of developing individuals. I also believe the structure of the Continuum needs to be discussed to support the continued development of young players in the key areas of skill development.