

EDITOR'S NOTES

17.04.07

Francis Kenealy's article last week, regarding age group and size, drew a response from readers and please do respond either to the article or to the responses of Peter Croot and Ian 'Spike' Milligan.

Peter Croot from Oundle wrote, "The above article I think is correct in a lot of observations and needs further debate. We see this every week. Currently as a mini and junior chairman/coach I am trying to raise the skill level, not the body building aspect of the game. But week in and week out, we see a "large" boy appear in the opposition to smash his way through. Having said that, at least our boys are learning to tackle properly, but it does put a growing number off the game until confidence builds."

If young players are being lost to the game because of opponents' physical stature, albeit temporarily, should we not be trying to get a workable balance? Or is the current situation as 'fair' as it can be at the practical level?

Spike Milligan is a coach who has contributed some very clear and common-sensed ideas in response to various articles. On this subject he wrote, "Having just read today's article I felt I had to write a response. Most people use the 'mismatch' of size argument as a reason that children leave the game. I'd pick up a couple of things from Francis' article in so far as the coaches pick their teams and, by default, pick the style of the game the team plays. This has nothing to do with the size, age or otherwise of the children. My experience, which has been with the mini section at Swaffham where I have coached teams from under 7 to the current under 12 teams, is that some clubs regard matches as the opportunity to win rather than the opportunity to put into practise those things we have spent time on at training. (Hopefully this will lead to a win but if not, then we have to address this in training).

In my squad we do have the large, powerful players and the other extreme as well. We are well versed in the contact area but have the speed and flair to, at times, use the spaces in front of us. I am aware of a team locally who almost shun contact and have developed their players using the skills at U7 & U8 in evasive running and exploiting space - and brought those firmly into the older age groups. They are a joy to watch with the ball but have now brought defence and contact into their game. However, when they get the ball it moves well and quickly and often with devastating effect. It seems to me that too many teams focus solely on the contact aspects when they can and forget what the initial age groups were designed to bring to the game.

Change for change sake isn't the way and looking to put a weight / size limit in would be just as divisive. There is a long-running thread on this on the RFU forums, which at one point describes a child being weighed on the pitch prior to a game, with others worrying about whether to have breakfast prior to a match (It would be a cold day in hell before I was involved in a sport which allowed that as a common practise!).

Would the national side exclude Ellis, Robinson etc as they are too small? No, rugby is a game for all shapes and sizes and, if coached correctly, works brilliantly. If we go to weight limits, would teams not just still look to 'play the big boys' and the range of the sizes just get pushed to the higher limits?

The age range is fine, though I'd question the motivation of some of the team selection at some points not only in the 'playing the big boys' example as given, but also intentionally playing people outside of age group just to win a match, which in either mini or youth really doesn't matter. We have seen whole teams one week in a friendly match become players in the age group lower at a festival the week after, and yes they won it. The bottom line is that these age groups are there to develop rugby skills for later and, therefore, ensuring that we *retain* people for later. If this isn't working we have to look at the decisions, methods, styles and mentality of the coaching these young players are receiving.

Yes the All Blacks do things differently and I'm sure we can learn things from them, but the thing I would focus on here is watch how they support their ball carriers, look at how they exploit the spaces and how rarely they go into contact with the ball. Look at the pace they play the game at. As for size differences, stand Dan Carter next to Richie Macaw and that argument goes away quickly.

As coaches it is our responsibility to develop the skills and opportunities each young player has regardless of size, height, weight, speed, etc. They will develop physically during the years in mini / youth rugby and we are not aware of what nature has in store for them at the early end of this period.

Just my opinion for what it's worth."

Well, readers, what is *your* opinion? It will only take a few minutes to reply to keithrichardson@therfu.com and you will be able to share your thoughts with other coaches. Gary Townsend's article today may give you even more food for thought!

Keith Richardson, Technical Journal Editor.