

NO-FEAR RUGBY BY DAVID MAYS

The author has a wide range of coaching experience. He lives in Canada and has coached Nanaimo Hurricanes Premier women's side, Vancouver Island Crimson Tide, British Columbia U19 women, Vancouver Island Raiders, Canada women in the Churchill Cup, Barbados in the 2007 RWC qualifiers and West Indies 7s - and he still found time to be a British Columbia Rugby Development Officer 2003 – 2006.

At times, rugby can be played with a tremendous sense of purpose and flair, but there are moments within games when a lack of ingenuity or fear of failure creeps in and teams become stagnant and ultimately predictable in their approach. Most notably, their fear of losing overpowers their freedom of expression and a willingness to take a risk. Think of all the great games, tries and contests you have ever seen and then think, “Did that team play with fear or tension? Did they take no risks or play an inhibited style?” The answer to both questions is usually, “No.”

When teams play with *passion*, as did France in their win over New Zealand in the 1999 World Cup semi-final, or play and *take risks* as Australia did when playing Ireland in the 1991 World Cup quarter final, or are willing to try *any style* of rugby to succeed like the Brumbies in their 2001 Super 12 campaign and the current super team, the Canterbury Crusaders, who epitomize modern-day, purposeful rugby - all of these teams played with a **no-fear** attitude.

So how do you create a **no-fear** team that has the ability to be successful? I believe there are a few key elements that will substantially increase the chances of success if the following guidelines are implemented.

1. A ‘coaching team’ who are willing to allow their players to express themselves without the fear of ridicule or criticism.
2. Athletes who trust and believe in themselves, their team mates and coaching staff around them.
3. In a professional environment, a board of directors/executives who share the same vision and support their coaches and players even when the results aren't as positive as they would expect (Eddie Jones' current problem at the Queensland Reds).
4. Play a style of rugby that challenges and excites the players to experiment with the way they play, but most of all, play a style that challenges the opposition to its maximum overload.

1. How do the coaches create an environment with a sense of freedom to express and a *no-fear* attitude?

- Initially the coaching staff have to share their vision with their players, expressing their thoughts and ideas of what they believe is attainable and how they would like to create it
- Players then need to have time to digest the initiatives and directions and then present their ideas and objectives to the coaching staff. This will create a common ground where both parties share the same visions of where they would like to be and where they would like to progress to in the future.
- The outcome or result is never discussed. Every team wants to win, every competitive athlete wants to succeed - it's the quality of the individuals' and team's performance that can be judged as success or failure, not the score line!
- Coaches share their pre-practice/game ideas with the athletes and prepare their directives based on feedback from these meetings. Nothing should be done without the players having an input or knowledge of what is to be implemented or used.
- Players will evaluate themselves and also receive additional feedback from their coaches, which will allow for an interpersonal relationship with the coaches, where trust and communication lines are constant and purposeful.
- During practices, players will be challenged but not criticized for their actions. They will be asked how, what and why they may have done, but most of all, how can it be improved upon.
- Practices will always have a purpose and an evaluation of the sessions will be conducted not only by the coaches, but also by lead players within the squad to improve the content or plan of the next session.
- All practices will have a "Game Sense" approach, where the skills developed will be replicated in the game and will be conducted under game-like pressure situations.
- All practices and games will be videoed to record data for analysis and review and players will receive individualized video footage of their games to review before a meeting with their coaches to look for improvements or changes.
- Players at all times have the freedom to express or explain their actions without fear of criticism.
- Feedback is a two way process and, unless the coaches know their players' thoughts, a trust and **no-fear** environment won't be created.
- Coaches at all times must be positive and encouraging to freedom of expression, creative flair and risk taking by players. You cannot suddenly change the system for fear of failure; if you do, all trust will evaporate immediately.
- There is an old saying, "A coach's door is never closed." Coaches must be available to their athletes at all times to create the perfect environment for success. Athletes need constant support and feedback; it can't just stop

when things are going tremendously well or when things are up against the wall. The door must always be open!

2. So how do you get your athletes to believe in themselves, their team-mates and coaches around them?

- A **‘truth’** policy is the first thing that I believe needs to be enforced. There can be no secrets or covering up of actions or emotions.
- If you tell someone something and the next person something else, what happens? No one really knows the real answer! If everyone shares and expresses the truth to each other, then there are no secrets!
- Confidence - the ability to believe in something 100% and know you are capable of achieving or performing under pressure. This is only created by coaches and fellow players keeping a positive attitude and complimenting each other’s actions and abilities.
- Positive feedback and the ability to recognize where to improve.
- Open lines of communication between all players and coaches.
- Small attainable goals, that ultimately creates a larger collective goal. Keep everything in perspective - don’t go beyond the boundaries of what is currently attainable.
- Analysis and evaluation of everyone’s actions, coaches included. The ability for all the programme participants to look for improvements individually to create a collective quality product.
- Team-bonding. Coaches’ and players’ interaction off the field is paramount; the whole programme needs to be an extended family where making a mistake is accepted because we all care about each other’s performances, lives and outcomes.
- Keep the practice environment enjoyable but purposeful. There are times for laughter and times for full-on intensity. Learn to identify these times and accept the outcomes. The practice content will ultimately create the finished game product!
- Have fun and enjoy the journey, enjoy the moment not the end product. All teams strive for success, but sometimes forget that the journey to the success was far more rewarding than the final result or outcome!

3. Because Canadian Rugby is still an amateur sport, I will skip the topic that discusses Board and Executive support as this is for the professional ranks of the game.

4. Playing a style of rugby that challenges but excites your players whilst pushing the boundaries of the opposition enormously. How do you create this?

- Let the players embrace the challenge by encouraging them to have input on the product or style you want to play. Allow them to come up with innovative plays or strategies.
- Accept you don't know all the answers, but collectively as a group your chances of success are multiplied enormously.
- Don't allow the athletes to see failure in their actions. Encourage them to express innovation and to take risks.
- Openly share game strategy and ideas amongst everyone. There are no blind hands in a successful team or coaching staff.
- Design your game plan around your athletes' abilities, not what you would like to do! Just because the All Blacks play in a certain way, it doesn't mean your athletes are capable of replicating it!
- Experiment and evaluate the process. Don't dismiss something immediately because it failed, because most first-up attempts fail. However, if you all believe it will succeed or give you an edge, persevere with it until it's proven to be successful or is seen by all as an unproductive strategy.
- Create a mental, physical, skilled, technical and tactical platform to work from, then continually strive for improvements within each category. All the most successful teams have a successful combination of the items listed above, but unless they strive for perfection in each, the chances of future success will diminish
- Be willing to think 'out of the box'. Don't always do what the opposition expects you to, so sometimes do the opposite of what most situations dictate. Our minds are sometimes a little unreceptive to change or an uncalculated direction, but this is what divides the good teams from the great teams – the great ones are willing to do something that at first sight might seem uncharacteristic to get 'the edge'.
- Observe your opposition to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. This will help you plan ahead for your next game against them and help you to decide which strategies to use to combat their strengths and exploit their weaknesses.
- Put your stronger players on their weaker players at certain parts of the field or in an important segment of the game.
- Design game plans for all the teams you will play and be able to use them effectively and be calculating as to when to use or change the system to gain the upper hand.
- Your athletes need to identify the opposition's weaknesses and their players. Teach them to identify this and how to formulate a plan to exploit it.
- Encourage risk and experimentation, but also be thorough in your preparation and repetition to create the finished product. Quality products and performances take hours of practice and rehearsal, but the more time and evaluation you commit to it, the more chance of success will be created

- Strive to be faster, fitter and stronger than your opposing teams. This initially will give you an edge at the crucial stages of games when athletes' decision-making skills start to diminish with fatigue.
- Every practice has to have a purpose with key objectives to be identified and perfected. Preparation and planning will always be a key ingredient to a successful **no-fear** team.

Summary:

Take the risks! Share your visions and the wealth of knowledge as a collective group and within your programme; keep communication lines open with two-way feedback; install confidence and freedom to allow for innovation and flair; create a quality product, not result-focused obsession; don't be scared to think out of the box in your strategies and game plans; challenge your athletes tactically, physically and mentally, then thoroughly prepare with purpose. But most of all do this with **no-fear!**