

CLASSROOM COACHING WITH JIM MALLINDER

Ian Williams, RFU Rugby Development Officer in the Isle of Man, recently attended a workshop based on the aspects and ultimate effectiveness of coaching within the classroom environment. Jim Mallinder (National Academy) put forward his ideas on the topic and it showed that all coaching does not have to be carried out on the pitch; there can be a place for getting important coaching points across in the relative calm of the class or lecture room. (It can, of course, be a no more sophisticated area than a changing room).

We started with how to make a coaching session in the classroom become effective and talked about the differences in players' ability to learn in different environments. Knowing how your players learn and think is a key aspect of the coaching process, whether on or off the pitch, which can quickly be identified in the classroom by a lack of interest or snoring in the back of class. To alleviate this, the ratio of coach to players (and the number of relevant topics that can be absorbed in one session) appears to be the key to maximising the effectiveness of the sessions. Talks on game plans and tactics should gain everyone's attention with one or two coaches and the full playing squad, but aspects of front row play may not gain the full attention of the backs; similarly, the forwards may not be enthralled by too much detail on backs' moves. However, it has to be said that sitting through the details and learning what happens away from their special area will make them better players; understanding different aspects of the game and others' roles has to be beneficial to any aspiring player.

So, choosing your topic(s) *and* your target audience are key factors in having an effective classroom session. Of course, time constraints may play a major part in your planning and prioritising of which aspects of your coaching you feel would suit being taught in the classroom, but, as we found out, *all* aspects of coaching can have value with classroom coaching by virtue of:

- Better feedback is possible in the relative calm of the classroom. It is calm and quiet and players are better able to suggest ideas and receive information than when they are tired on the pitch.
- Note taking is possible in this environment and the process means that each player has had to listen carefully then write down the information – a double chance of retention of information.
- There are fewer external factors causing problems and wind, rain and/or snow should not enter the equation.

Just about all aspects of classroom coaching have the benefit of having, if required, video analysis, feedback and discussion. Individual skills can be studied and analysed in detail with a tactical, physical and mental plan to implement at the next opportunity. This applies both to games and/or training performance(s), with resulting

outcomes checked for improvements (or lack of them!). Whatever the outcome, a new plan will have been implemented and the individual player will have gained in knowledge and understanding.

Unit skills can also be worked on in the same manner, with the group working on each other's and their own improvements. Team play, both set piece and open play, can be studied and developed by analysis and discussion. Some care needs to be taken here as a good knowledge of your players as a group will be most important. Your choice of leaders to help you with the groups must be those who understand what you want and how it will help them, individually and collectively, to become better players and a better team.

To help this overall process, guest speakers and specialists can be of benefit to create variety and a healthier learning environment. Getting different people 'talking from the same sheet', but perhaps from a slightly different approach/angle, helps to re-enforce and improve the learning ability and belief of the players. This is very important when a major aspect of the game, e.g. the correct mental attitude, is under discussion.

The session finished with some video analysis where the audience was given ten seconds to study a game clip, then they had to place all thirty players on to a pitch plan and talk about the options that may occur from that game situation; then we watched to see what the two teams actually did. The object of the exercise was to try to understand the players' reasoning and subsequent actions in the clips, but then we were invited to suggest what the players might gain from using the classroom technique to improve their performance from study and analysis of these game situations. It was felt that, by improving their game knowledge and, therefore, experience, this would improve their game play by recalling and remembering specific incidents/experiences; it should/might also help them to develop the skills to scan during games, which helps to identify opposition weaknesses and how to exploit them whilst playing.

This was an excellent workshop that highlighted the benefits of keeping an open mind to the way we coach, with a view to using *all* available resources to their maximum. The more resources you have access to, the easier it will be to set up, of course. However, with a resourceful coaching set-up and planning, the classroom method could add to the impact of what we coach. An improvement in results should be noticed, with the players feeling the benefit of playing and learning to their full potential and increasing their enjoyment of the game.