

EDITOR'S NOTES

20.11.07

The 'Top Two Inches' article got two very interesting responses from Swaffham and Japan, so there couldn't have been any cheating and copying in the exam room. I honestly believe that you coaches do feel strongly about most of the articles we publish, but time is short and there are always other things to do.

At the risk of being extremely repetitive and hugely boring, though, I still think that the ideas of coaches will generally hit the spot. You are the people who have to get teams organised with very little time, so you have an armoury of experience at the practical level. We can all pontificate from the rooftops, but will it work on Tuesday and Thursday night?

The ever-reliable Ian 'Spike' Milligan (Swaffham Rugby, www.swaffhamrugby.com) was first with:

"Keith,

In response to the 'Top Two Inches', article I thought I'd drop you my thoughts.

I have been involved in coaching junior rugby for the last 7 years at my club. Like a lot of people, I returned to the game as a parent of a, at the time, very young player. When he started, the coaches were all using Auckland girds and drill-based training. I qualified as a Level 1 coach a few years ago now and as I took on the age group and moved through our mini section with them, I've adopted my own style of coaching. I'm not in any way saying this is the way forward - it is just something I am happy with and the players react positively to.

I did away with girds and drills when I started coaching the team and focused instead on a different approach to training. We start with a warm-up with some basic fitness aspects but it is done at pace and in a pressurised environment. There is a lot of talk and positive noise from the players and everything is done competitively against either a stretched target or challenging timeframe.

Then we break and I will set them an objective which I want to focus on. Normally the objective is based on reflection of the last match, which I do with the other coaches in the age group. For instance, whilst they recorded a 35-5 victory on Sunday, they still need to work on creating space in the opposition defensive line and then exploiting it. I'll give them that as an objective, sort out two teams, throw a couple of conditions of play in - for example a ruck or maul has a 3 second time limit or will result in a turn over - and let them play.

I stop for water breaks regularly, at which points I'll question their decisions and see if they have any other ideas which they want to run. And then I let them go again. Normally I don't have to give them loads of direction, but maybe a little bit of guided questioning.

I have also not worked with them for specific 'moves' as in my opinion these, at times, miss opportunities as players are conditioned to follow the pattern and normally fail as the defence doesn't do what you expect.

I am aiming to have a squad of players who are capable of playing heads up rugby, confident in their own abilities and equally confident that their team mates will be there to support them whatever they choose to do with the ball. This, however, isn't just about coaching the skills of running, passing, kicking etc, but it is also embedding a culture of positive play and comments only; this bit is amongst the hardest aspect of the role of coach. Players will make bad decisions in a game, but the skill from their team mates is to rescue that and continue to disrupt and create chaos in the opposition's lines either in attack or defence and then exploit it.

I would far rather have a squad of players who are capable of thinking clearly, seeing or sensing opportunities and making reasoned decisions, confident that their team mates can also scan the game and work the same for the next phase and so on, than have a squad of well-drilled players who are following patterns blindly with no real sense of understanding why they are doing it."

Then Stephen Johnson replied from Japan. He has contributed articles and comments to the Technical Journal before and has a sharp coaching eye and enormous experience.

"Just read your reprimand to coaches for non-response to article on RWC 2007. Sorry. Although I watched almost every game, being here in Japan, I did not feel "part" of the tournament. I wish I had been able to gain access to the other media comments and other feedback that was available in UK. Then I read the article by Alex Pilz this morning, so here goes.

In my humble opinion, rugby almost always rewards the better team with victory, and victory is equally almost always determined by superiority in size, strength and speed; it rarely depends on the TTI - except at the rarified heights. Examples of these infinitely small gaps include the 2001 Lions losses to Australia and the All Blacks - Wallabies semi-final of the 2003 RWC. South Africa could probably have won this 2007 RWC with a total absence of TTI, such was their overall physical superiority. If they had possessed the courage to open the final game out, I think they would have won that one even more convincingly.

So, the huge majority of coaches working outside this rarified atmosphere would argue that, in the limited time they have available, they have to work to develop the physical and technical aspects of player improvement. BUT, I believe it is HOW coaches work at those aspects that distinguishes the good from the ordinary. By creating "thinking" practices, that are difficult technically and physically, we can develop TTI at the same time. However, it does take time, and how many coaches have that luxury? Moreover, all these good intention can be blasted apart if the next team you meet is full of behemoths who simply run over you.

The TJ over the years has provided dozens of really good, thinking, total-rugby practices, and it may simply be a case of finding a way to present these articles to coaches so that they can utilise them for their sessions. There is also much to learn from the past, and a lot that can be used now. (I recently saw some of the England games in the early 90s on Sky here, and it is eye-opening to see the variety of angles and plays used by backs like (even) Rob Andrew, Jeremy Guscott and Rory Underwood. They look like they are seeking ways to unlock the door rather than bashing it down.)

Developing the TTI is worthwhile; it takes time and imagination. But one day, the team will play in a way that will amaze and delight. I look forward to reading more of these articles.”

I’d prefer to think of my ‘reprimand’ more as a plea, so the age-old message still goes out. Do respond to anything you read here – or simply tell the rest of the brotherhood of coaches what you think about anything. You might even get an article out of it!

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