

**THE CHALLENGE TO COACHES AND COACHING
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*The author delivered a speech at the RFU International Coaching Conference, 2007,
and this article is based on the content of what he said to the delegates.*

I believe in player development and I believe in the impact that coaches can have on that development. The continual professional development of coaches is important and the words of Dave Whittaker, the 1986 gold medal Olympics hockey team coach, still ring true today.

“You owe it to your players to be the best coach you can possibly be.”

That doesn't mean that we want to develop coaches who are all the same. There is, I believe, opportunity to develop individuality in our coaches. I do not believe in developing a group of homogeneous coaches – points of difference are vitally important. ‘Big picture’ coaches, with a real sense of purpose and a clear understanding of how the principles of play can transform learning and performance, are vital for the future development of coaching.

Our challenge in coach development is to help to develop innovative and creative coaches who can maximise player and team potential. Even at the elite end of the game, where the media's microscopic analysis and interest have placed incredible stresses on coaches, there is scope for development.

The challenge of elite coach development is to develop coaches who can deal with the most intense coaching environment of world cups, international matches and the premiership.

**1. “THE EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN GAME AND THE MODERN
PLAYER AND THE PACE OF THAT CHANGE WILL DETERMINE THE
EVOLUTION OF THE MODERN COACH.”**

This conference has heard from Lynn Kidman about athlete-centred coaching and it is the modern player and the modern game that will determine the evolution of the modern coach. The introduction of professionalism has created a pace of change that has not been witnessed previously in our game. The challenge to coaches and coaching is to continually change and develop to keep pace with this evolution.

We can not afford to pay lip service to the coaching theories promoted by Lynn Kidman, John Whitmore and the other speakers at this conference. We must put these theories into practice and raise the awareness and responsibility in our players.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE MODERN PLAYER?

The challenge to coaching and coaches is to understand the modern player. The modern player is bigger, faster and stronger than ever before. He has higher skill levels and will respect only the most talented coaches. His family background is changing – he probably has less stability than in previous generations.

The modern player adopts a ‘pick and mix’ loyalty rather than a long-term allegiance. He is becoming increasingly preoccupied with self and is more independent and less submissive to authority. He finds difficulty in accepting criticism and is more liable to conflict.

The modern player brings more lifestyle problems, has a motivation that is less strong and more variable and is more liable to mental and/or physical burnout.

The character of the modern player will become increasingly important and the challenge to coaches will be to identify then develop players with character.

3. INFLUENCING THE MODERN PLAYER?

A better understanding of the players you are coaching will allow you to have an influence in helping each player to develop to his full potential. The table below shows the changing influences on a player and it is important to know the possible impact the coach may have on various age groups and various levels of ability.

AGE

- 10 Parents. Teachers. Coaches.
- 10-14 Parents. Coaches. Friends. Teachers.
- 14-18 Coaches. Friends. Parents. Agents.
- 18-22 Coaches. Friends. Lifestyle. Agent. Media.
- 22-26 Agent. Coaches. Lifestyle. Friends. Media.
- 26-30 Partner. Celebrity. Agent. Media. Coaches.
- 30-34 Family. Agent. Media. Coaches.

It is not surprising that coaches involved with the 14-22 age groups might have the greatest influences on players. Perhaps these are the coaches who should be most recognised and rewarded.

4. BALANCE OR BOREDOM?

A major challenge for coaches is to identify and avoid the potential for psychological problems in the modern player. There are many examples, but these are a selection that may ring bells with coaches:

Insecurity/instability - Loss of identity - Constantly changing self-esteem - Loss of self-belief/confidence – Stress - Performance fears – Over arousal/aggression/violence - Burnout - Depression/withdrawal.

Are we entering *the age of the disposable player*? It may be that Lynn Kidman’s views on the coach needing to influence a player’s esteem and to coach the well-being and development of the individual is every bit as important as coaching skill. Perhaps our challenge is to provide balance in a player’s life, which may need coaches to develop a humanistic approach to their coaching. The challenge to coaches is to help the player develop a balanced lifestyle with alternatives and release from the rugby environment.

5. GETTING THE BEST OUT OF THE MODERN PLAYER?

It is an increasing challenge for coaches to get the best out of their players. Recruitment is important – recruit players with good character and attitude. Treat players as people, not as performers. Encourage players to self-manage. Coach the whole player – physically, technically and tactically as well as mentally and emotionally. Profile players regularly, so that any changes are spotted early. Set each player objectives for improvement. Agree with each player his specific role on the pitch. See what players do – not just what they don’t do. Focus on performance as well as results. Give each player accurate and honest feedback. Surround the players with positive, supportive staff. The challenge to coaches is to create an environment of stability, optimism, purpose and fun.

6. TRADITIONAL OR MODERN COACHING?

‘What’ and, more importantly, ‘how’ you coach is vital to success. The challenge to coaches is to change from the traditional style of coaching to a more modern style. This table, suggested by Bill Beswick (Sportsmind Ltd), may highlight the different styles.

Traditional Coaching	Modern Coaching
• Focused on winning	• Focused on winning
• Task centred	• Player centred
• Results dominated	• Excellence dominated
• Instinctive	• Careful planning
• Player dependent	• Coach influenced
• Isolated	• Mentored
• ‘Me’	• ‘We’
• Authoritarian	• Democratic
• Yells	• Sells
• Speaks	• Listens then speaks
• Trainer	• Teacher
• Ex-player	• Qualified coach
• Hard worker	• Smart worker

These are some of the possible differences – where are you on these continuums?

7. RUGBY HANDBALL OR RUGBY FOOTBALL?

The challenge to coaches is to identify a playing philosophy that allows you to be successful but, in that process, do you promote rugby handball or rugby football?

Corris Thomas at the IRB Game Analysis Centre has identified two types of team:–

1. A team with 15 distributors such as New Zealand and Wales

Or

2. A team with 8 providers and 7 distributors such as England, Ireland, France, Argentina and South Africa.

What team do you coach? Do you emphasise tries or penalties? Statistics suggest that tries win matches! Only 4 matches in 46 world cup games have been won with the winning team scoring fewer tries than their opponents.

Do you promote structured play or freedom to play? Coaches have to coach players to make decisions – coaches can't make decision for players. The concept of Mission Command that is developed by the Royal Marines seems very apt for rugby. This was clearly explained at the conference by Ian Gardiner

Does fear of losing mean that you are left with simply a kicking game?

The average number of kicks out of hand per game was 52 in 2003 and the same looks to be true so far in 2007. However, France v New Zealand at the RWC produced 78 kicks. France v England produced 85 kicks with 46 by France. It is interesting to note that when France beat England in Marseille before the RWC, they only kicked 19 times!

Do you insist on restrictive game plans or do you coach principles of play and game understanding with flexibility of plans A, B and C? Ian Gardiner, in his presentation, said the coach doesn't win the battle, the players do. So, do you practise 'what if' scenarios and contingency plans like the Red Arrows? What happens, for instance, if you don't win the hit in the scrum and your subsequent planning assumes that you will?

8. BOLDNESS OR CONSERVATISM?

Brian Ashton's mantra is "Defy the impossible and shock the world." He encourages players to do things differently and he takes players out of their comfort zone in order to challenge them. Was this philosophy displayed or was compromise necessary in the harsh world of World Cup rugby?

The average number of rucks per game is about 70, but New Zealand's running and handling game over the last few years has brought their average well below that.

When they beat France 47 – 3 in Lyon last year, they scored 7 tries and created only 44 rucks in the entire game. Yet against France in this year's quarter-final of the RWC, they created 165 rucks! Had this something to do with Graham Henry's conservatism?

France certainly had enough possession to beat England in the semi-final of the RWC, but did conservatism and fear of losing make them kick when they might have run? Fear of losing can be a great motivator, never as clear as England's response after losing to South Africa, but it can also be very debilitating.

The challenge to coaches is - how bold can you be when under the most intense pressure?

9. EMPOWERMENT OR ABDICATION?

We have gone through a period of the 'Cult of the Coach', where the coach is regarded as the all-knowing guru, but the challenge to coaches is to give responsibility back to the players.

Some time ago Lynn Kidman promoted empowerment as an important coaching process, but this has to be achieved without coaches abdicating responsibility. Coaches can and should defer to superior knowledge, such as that of the doctors, physios or specialist coaches, but the buck has to stop with the head coach. The challenge now is for the coach to be a facilitator. The modern head coach will need enough knowledge in all areas ("knowledge of all the ologies," as Sue Campbell put

it) to be able to support and challenge his staff and players. The challenge is to empower his staff but not abdicate responsibility.

10. CULTURE OF BLAME OR CULTURE OF HONESTY?

What environment or culture do you create around your team? The challenge is to create a culture of openness and honesty, where feedback is viewed as information rather than criticism. The challenge is then to create an environment of stability, optimism, purpose and fun.

Achievement rarely matches expectation and managing the gap between the two is a perpetual coaching challenge. The coach gets the blame when the team loses and the players get the praise when they win – and that may be how it ought to be. However, if the coach is the 16th player in the squad, then the reality is that he might contribute 1/16th (or 6.5%) to the success of the team; if he is the 23rd player, he contributes 1/23rd (or 4.5%).

Managing expectations is important and managing upwards as well as downwards and sideways is always a challenge for a coach. Managing the club owner, the committee or the Board is a demanding task if those people are to be educated about coaching.

11. KNOWING THE COACH YOU WANT TO BE.

At this conference, Sue Campbell suggested that we should observe and reflect on the coaching of others and visualise what we would do or how we might react in the same situation. As coaches, we must observe our own coaching, listen to our players and

ask for feedback. The challenge is to know the coach you are and to know the coach we want to be.

Justin Hughes of the Red Arrows talked about the desirability of conducting a self-critique of your own performance as the very first step in evaluating performance. Valuable lessons for coaches from his presentation were to commit to learning and to excellence; to set high standards and not compromise on your coaching philosophy; to have ambition - "If you don't go for it, you never achieve it."

The key to learning is humility. Openness to learning is vital and very often the main (or sole) blocker is ego. Identify a mentor, ask for feedback on your coaching and, above all, work hard, make sacrifices, take risks and be bold.

12. BEING AN EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT COACH.

All the presenters at the Conference have talked, in varying degrees, about self-awareness and awareness of others, of empathy and rapport, of effective communication, questioning and emotional control. The challenge is to be a humanistic and emotionally intelligent coach or leader. The lessons from John Whitmore are to tune in to yourself - learn how to stay positive. Tune in to how others feel - observe and question. Recognise that what you say and do affects players' feelings - people might not remember what you said to them but they will remember how you made them feel. Create a vision that engages the heart as well as the mind. Care about people who support you and who you coach. Become an optimistic realist - look for good things happening. Interpret and give meaning to the difficult times - perspective is important. Be proactive in dealing with issues of emotion - do not let bad feelings fester. You may have to criticise the players, but always support the person. Ensure that you appoint emotionally intelligent staff. Take care of your own energy. Have the courage to ask - share the ownership. When you are at fault, admit it and move on.

13. CHANGE OR DIE.

The only constant is change and the challenge to coaching is to continually change. Doing the same thing again will not get the same results. Stand still and you'll be overtaken. There are no magic answers and no secrets to effective and successful coaching, but if you share your knowledge and show a willingness to learn at conferences like this then you will inevitably grow as a coach.

Change or die! Good luck!