

YOUTH RUGBY COACHING BY EAMONN HOGAN

The author is a PE teacher at Lincoln Minster School. In his past he has been a coach within the RAF U21s, Combined Services Germany, a CB coach within Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire & Derbyshire and has recently been working with USA youth representative sides in Indiana and Arizona.

In 2005, Eamonn contributed to the Technical Journal an article on coach burnout within the amateur game in his constituent body. These are his own personal thoughts on youth coaching.

“Professional coaches measure success in rings. College coaches measure success in championships. High School coaches measure success in titles. Youth coaches measure success in smiles.”

USA Youth Coach

This article will concentrate on the one bracket of rugby coaching that I spend a significant amount of my free time working within - youth rugby. I hope it will not come across to the reader as a polemic on the state of the Youth Rugby Nation, but merely a personal view to what I see are some issues concerning English coaches within the youth game today. It does not contain any coaching notes, drills or a means to secure national domination; however, it should allow those of us who work within the youth game a chance to pause and reflect about what we do with our young charges, in the hope that the structures can work more beneficially for the players.

Coaching youth rugby presents its own unique challenges and, over recent years, I have had cause to examine my own approach to the varying roles I have had within the youth game. In those navel-gazing hours there are cold-sweat moments when it has all gone dreadfully wrong, but through those times comes clarity and a resolve. What follows are five discussion points that I want to just throw out there in the hope that maybe some thoughts can be taken on how we all approach the youth game.

1. What is the correct use of guest coaches?

A few years ago I asked a very experienced coach if I could have ten minutes of his time to discuss a point of coaching that I was having some difficulty with. He graciously agreed and, as is the norm with good rugby coaches, the ten minutes turned into two hours of vigorous debate. At the end of the talk, he asked me would I be willing to hear the best advice ever on how to become an elite coach. Naively, I waited with bated breath for the secret to great coaching.

“The secret to becoming a world class coach, Eamonn, is to enrol on a course at Bath University where they teach you to speak with a Kiwi accent!!”

Far from deriding our southern hemisphere colleagues, he was criticising people's belief that everything outside Britain was good and what we did inside Britain was bad. I should say that this was before England won the RWC in 2003, but I regret to report that, in relative terms, the principle still remains true today within youth rugby.....professional coaches are always better than amateur ones when it come to coaching youth players.

The comedian Paddy McGuinness was once asked if it was easier to do stand-up comedy if you have been in a famous TV show. He said the audience will give you ten minutes – after that you had better be funny. The very same could be applied to a guest coach. Coming into a grassroots environment as a high profile coach will get you the first ten minutes – after that, you had better be good and you had better be empathetic!! Not all elite coaches can empathise with the performers several levels below and often players believe they have learned nothing, which, considering the money paid out, is a terrible shame. (*The reverse situation, however, can also be true.*)

A guest coach can bring a different approach/voice to your players' rugby experience, but a coach from a professional club need not necessarily be the right person to develop your team's skills. In 2001 I watched a very high profile coach fall apart when coaching a county U16s as he was not able to adapt his coaching style to their level. Those players were at a loss from start to finish as to the aims of the session and the coach, obviously used to working with highly skilled performers at a national and international level, could in no way empathise with the young performers on the day. To the gentleman's credit, he turned to the watching coaches that day and said he probably learned more about himself in that one session than he had in the previous ten years as an elite coach.

Choose your guest coach carefully. There are some wonderful professional coaches in the game and, close to our CB, we have some of the best at Leicester Tigers. But all clubs need to choose a visiting coach who can add something special to their own club and coaching environment - and if that person is a high profile coach, then it can be excellent. However, there may already be a guy at a club somewhere closer and in the area who may be able to pitch that 'best practice' at your players' level. County, EPDG or School of Rugby coaches are a good starting place for a community club, but whoever you choose, ensure that they give you value for money and actually give your players an affirming experience worthy of *their* time.

Key word – empathy!

2. Coach development.

"Take time to gather up the past so that you will be able to draw from your experiences and invest them in the future."

Jim Rohn

A teaching colleague once told me that even history changes, so you need to keep up. If you are in a role in which only a casual knowledge of rugby is required, referring to the comments made in the previous section may be an option. However.....

Never before has there been so much information available to help coaches prosper. The coaching courses are very much tailored to your own personal ambitions and the RFU, WRU and SRU have

put together a system that is, for the first time, transferrable throughout the UK. Via the internet, coaching newsletters, You Tube, Bebo, MySpace and various file-sharing resource sites, it is almost impossible to hide anything. If you want to know something, you can find it somewhere. Areas of the game at the top level change on a weekly basis (*as we are seeing with the law variations trailed in the Super 14*) and to keep up, you need constantly to network and challenge your own perspective on the game.

So once a year, surround yourself with like-minded, committed individuals who enjoy travelling to events and **attend coach development workshops!**

But this will only get you half-way to your ambitions. The other area of coach development is what you do with the information you have gained. Creating a style to suit yourself and your team is a key ingredient. You know your players better than anyone so *how* you put that information across to them is so important. You must personalise that information and teach it at a rate that can be easily digested by your team. Sometimes, a session you have watched at a coach development workshop may take your whole season to develop, but that's acceptable as the players are learning something that will aid their progress and, ultimately, the game's progress.

3. Representative responsibilities.

Having just won the championship, a journalist approached the coach and stated, "You know, you've had a very successful year."

The coach replied, 'I won't know that for another twenty five years.

They're still young men at eighteen, twenty years of age, but it's what they do with their next twenty or thirty years and how they turn out that will have more an impact on me and what my achievements have been with them, rather than what was happening immediately."

Unnamed USA College coach

Our job as coaches is complicated at grassroots level and isn't always as simple as turning up, coaching, then going home. The process does get a little more labour intensive, of course, when you add in the pressure that can come with county or divisional coaching, but the honour and the rewards that those roles bring are extrinsically and intrinsically felt. But there is a worrying trend occurring in representative youth rugby that many parents and coaches feel needs to be addressed.

The curse of every select side is lack of time together. This is as true at the highest levels of our game as it is at grassroots. Therefore, the pursuit of extra training time is such that a young player feels under more and more pressure from adults to adhere to their personal team's timetable and not of anyone else's. Which team is the most important? Which has the first call on the player's time? And which team offers the best development opportunities?

Every Michelmas term (September to December), schools and clubs are inundated with requests for extra training, or for their players to be rested, or for their players to miss fixtures altogether. If they ignore this request, they sometimes risk punitive action from the representative side. I speak as a teacher and a former club coach, and if schools and clubs didn't want their players to play for the county or country, teachers would not have nominated them for inclusion into a county programme in the first place. All of the stakeholders are already on board with the representative

side's efforts and all the process needs is a little empathy (*there's that word again*) from all parties and an understanding of the primary needs of the player.

If you are the manager or coach of a representative side and want a player to choose your representative fixture over a school game, **you** should make the call to his coach/teacher and don't ask the player to walk into the office of his PE department and fight a battle for you. The placement of a fixture in a letter or an email does not guarantee a player's attendance with no issues whatsoever. The player has to live with the consequences of those demands long after you have left the picture. Surely we are more evolved as a rugby entity in 2008 than to continually offer players a Hobson's Choice of school/club rugby versus representative rugby? Should we ask a player to destroy the relationship with his school and club mates for the **possibility** of short-term success?

So I would implore that team managers/head coaches talk to the clubs and schools to negotiate with them for a balance in their athletes' playing demands. This balance might be aided by my next point.

4. Understand the structure you're coaching within.

“Key to rugby success: fitness, skills, motivation. Motivation comes from the players knowing that they are involved in a system, which they trust to deliver.”
Matt Williams

It is the easiest thing in the world to say to your players that *your* team is the most important thing in the world. It is a state of mind that seems fine on the surface but can lead to conflicts down the line. I have spent a large amount of time understanding the Youth Structured Season in its entirety and how it affects clubs/schools from grassroots all the way up to England 16s/RFU Licensed Academy level. I understand the requirements of the players within the state-run and independent sectors in regard to school rugby play. I also understand the need for club players to attend regular training sessions after school and for matches and, if this is followed correctly by all parties, the Youth Structured Season will allow the entire world to live in harmony.....sort of.

I know all of this is because I have no social life, but I think a key point needs to be made here. Through all of this, there is nothing that says the RFU rate the importance of one group over another. What they do say is that we all have a role and the season has actually been designed to help all concerned to complete their vital roles to help these young performers.

The new EPDG/School of Rugby programme works strictly to the Youth Structured Season (13s – 16s) so the next time a conflict occurs between the demands of a club, school, representative side etc, have a quick look at the Youth Structured Season document and see whether or not you have the right to be a little upset. You may find that you have a solution to your problem in hard copy

5. Parental communication.

If you are a part of a representative team or a talented working group such as a School Of Rugby and EPDG, I have found that the best promoters or detractors of your programme are the parents and guardians of the players who work within your system. There are people who say that parents

are a nightmare to deal with and your only job is to coach their children. I am not sure which structure you work in, but the days of parents not being involved fully in their children's lives have long gone – if it ever was the case in the first place.

“So what?” you may ask. “I am not a slave to my players’ parents.” That is correct – you are there to coach and your team is not a charity looking after waifs and strays. However, by communicating effectively with the parents and the people in your players’ lives, you will be surprised how much goodwill is available. I cannot tell you how many times I have been contacted by parents telling me about their sons’ injuries, physio appointments, club dinners etc that all affect the demands on my players’ time that I would not normally have been informed about if I hadn’t encouraged this two-way dialogue. More importantly, my colleagues phone the parents to follow up on injury concerns, which in itself speaks volumes about how our programmes are looked upon by the players within our area.

In a modern empathetic arena of trust and welfare, players want to attend. Parents buy into the process by being an active participant and, although there are times when these conversations do become difficult, all things being equal, I would rather speak to them than not. On match days, the pressure is sometimes lifted on a coach when all of the stakeholders become active participants in their sons’ day, having been completely involved at all stages to this point. They understand the sacrifices the coaches have made in helping their children and it is very much appreciated.

Finally, one thought heard from an American colleague of mine. He was at a Senior High School dinner when a high-profile college coach uttered the following.

“To be a great coach you have to believe that you are the greatest thing in the world – with the nagging voice that says you actually are not.”

I leave you with that to ponder