

When All is Equal, Skill is King. By Damian McGrath.

At The Academy Managers' meeting at Leeds on Wednesday, 20th October, Damian McGrath gave a lecture on the subject above. He did suggest that some of his material was blindingly simple and obvious – but many coaches lose sight of the blindingly simple and obvious. (Editor)

The author is the National Academy Skills Coach and wrote '101 Rugby Training Drills' with Ray Unsworth (Published by Life Sports Ltd, ISBN 190072300X).

His coaching CV is: 1996 – 2000, assistant coach, Leeds Rhinos; 1998 – 2000, assistant coach, England Rugby League; 1994 – 1996, Great Britain Academy head coach; 2001, Great Britain U21 coach. He came to Rugby Union and has been England 7s skills and defence coach and England 'A' defence coach since 2001; he has also worked with Leicester Tigers as skills coach 2002 – 2004.

There are three very important components that are required for sport at the highest level:

- Physical preparation.
- Mental preparation.
- Skill level.

A simple equation of the make-up of performance might be:

Great performance = skill level + physical preparation + psychological readiness.

What, though, are we looking for in the athletes that we think we can coach to great performance in rugby? We need to look for players with:

- Size.
- Strength.
- Mobility.
- Speed.
- Athleticism.
- Mental capacity.

However, all coaches will be looking for these attributes and many will find what they are looking for. ***But when all else is equal, skill is king.***

When we are trying to get players to perform at high skill levels, there is no secret. The skill does not alter if and when it is performed by a top-class player compared with the same skill being performed by a less able player. Excellence is the ability to do the common thing in an uncommon way.

The very word 'skill' means many things to many people. Ray Unsworth, the Coaching Director at the RFL, defines it thus: *“The capacity to produce the desired result with a consistency and an efficiency of time and effort.”*

When we deal with skill there are various building blocks that we should be looking at and utilising:

- Balance.
- Walking/running.
- Hand/eye coordination.
- Hand/foot/eye coordination.

Once we understand what are the essentials in the building blocks, *skill development then involves understanding what you want to achieve and allying it to the physical responses to make it happen.* And once skills have been developed, players must use them frequently or they will lose them. Even what appear to be the simplest and most rudimentary of skills require practice; retention is not automatic.

This is important for all coaches as it is easy to forget basic skills, in order to allow time to concentrate on other aspects of the game. The danger is that *coaches can look at everything but see nothing* when they coach, forgetting that the fundamental skills of the game are the most important. Sometimes it is vital for a coach to think more about what he wants and what he believes are the core skills of any game. Abraham Lincoln suggested that, “If I was given eight hours to chop down a tree, I would spend six hours sharpening the axe.”

Once the necessary core skills are identified, they have to be practised. There are many important elements to how players are encouraged to practise.

- There must be intensity in the work.
- The coach must spend adequate and appropriate lengths of time on the drills so that progress is made.
- The work must occur frequently so that the skill is constantly being practised.
- The practice should, whenever possible, be carried out in a simulated aspect of the total game and not in isolation.
- The coach should provide various controlled experiences so that players learn to produce the skill(s) in different situations and they do not learn to respond to only one stimulus.
- The skill(s) have to be developed and refined.
- The skills must be relevant to the game and to what the player requires.

Once the skill practices are decided upon, the coach must remember:

- Inappropriate practice is as bad as no practice at all.
- Once you begin a skill it should be coached throughout.
- Continuous repetitive practice will lead to a skill becoming instinctive.
- Break a skill down whenever possible.
- Never sacrifice quality.

- Demonstrations, when used, must be perfect (and ‘a picture paints a thousand words.’)
- Allow players to practise and learn when they are fresh.
- Once the skill is learned, oppose it.

We coaches all want our players to improve and skill enhancement and development are crucial. *Excellence is the ability to do the common thing in an uncommon way.* Practice and how it is structured is so important; *if players train the way they always train, they will play the way they always play.*

If players are to improve and develop their skill levels, coaches must accept a very important role. To accept the role in the first place it is surely important for that role to be understood by the coach. He might consider the following as a ‘job description’ of any coach:

- Identify players’ faults and deficiencies.
- Prioritise them.
- Work on one area at a time.
- Set logical and progressive tasks that facilitate –
 1. Correction.
 2. Skill development.
 3. Advancement.

*Damian then identified passing a ball as a core skill of rugby and suggested a **hierarchy of necessity** when breaking the skill into ‘coachable’ components. His hierarchy was:*

- **Grip/ security.**
- **Carry/ security.**
- **Balance/ movement.**
- **Transfer/ reception.**

*His simple motto is, “**Break it down and build it up.**”*

He followed the talk with a practical session with a group of Leeds (England) Academy players and he stressed that what he was about to work on on grip, carry, balance and transfer was very simple indeed. It was simple but it was nevertheless very worthwhile. He brought the components down to a very basic level and worked on the theory that most passes go wrong because a so-called ‘simple’ part of the skill has not been performed properly. This dooms the hoped-for final outcome of an effective pass.

*The work he carried out will be reported on in a later article, but the Editor thought that a challenge might be given to coaches. How would you start to work on two of the components, **grip** and **security**? What sort of practice would you invent and develop to improve both?*

If you have any ideas/thoughts on the subject, please send them to Keithrichardson@therfu.com



You can send photographs as j-pegs if you wish. If you want to offer diagrams and can not produce them, simply sketch them with a few words of instruction and your name and fax them to 01453 826952.

Do not worry if you think that your ideas are too simple! Simplicity is usually the key to success.