

## **How Cohesion Helped Build a Winning Program – NSW Waratahs Women – Campbell Aitken**

### **Introduction**

Creating and maintaining a consistently winning rugby squad team requires a strategic approach encompassing various key factors. ***Coaching cohesion, succession planning, team culture, trust, and consistent training*** are crucial elements that contribute to the long-term success of a rugby team.

At NSW Waratahs, we have unbeaten domestically for 6 seasons and have increased our Wallaroo playing pool from 6 to 26 during that time. The report below notes the key aspects of that sustained success and gives insight to the program.

Understanding what makes the best sporting sides is detailed in annual studies undertaken by Gain Line Analytics <https://www.gainline.biz/> - the studies reveal the top 25 sporting sides in Australasia over a twelve month period. NSW Waratahs Women have featured in the last two years and are the only Australian rugby side to feature. Notably the Crusaders from NZ have been placed first in the last two years.

Coaching cohesion and continuity are the key aspects of success according to the studies.

### **Coaching Cohesion**

Maintaining a consistent and confident coaching group has been key to our success over the past 6 seasons. The Head Coach has been involved in the past 5 seasons and being Head Coach for the past 4. This has allowed for consistent coaching, player/coach relationship development, consistent recruitment and strong relationship with staff.

The early appointment of a Head Coach to allow them to oversee talent ID has been a strong factor in the NSW Waratahs success. The Head Coach has always been appointed immediately following the conclusion of the last campaign. As a result, the Head Coach has been able to consistently watch club games, attend club training sessions & attend junior carnival days. Having the Head Coach visible and approachable at these events means that each player in the club competition feels like they are being watched and monitored and the junior players feel they are also being watched. Over the past 5 seasons the Waratahs have consistently picked up to 3 under 18 players in their final squads thus keeping that cohesion and allowing junior players to experience the environment.

Having coaching cohesion also allows for consistency and development of player skill set over a sustained period of time. The playing structure on the field as well as on the training ground allows for quicker development of players and allows players to own this and pass on any knowledge to newer players within the group – thus players understanding of structure becomes more complete that they can then coach younger players through. The opposite of this would be a new Head Coach every season or the late appointment of a Head Coach and therefore a change of playing structure and training structure from season to season leading to confusion amongst the players and staff.

Player/Coach relationship is a key fundamental for success, looking at Scott Robertson at the Crusaders, Craig Bellamy at the Storm and Nathan Clearly at the Panthers – all seem to have a strong relationship with their players and specifically the influential senior players. Having coaching cohesion allows for these relationships to develop over time. At the Waratahs there was consistency of senior leadership group with one new player being introduced to this leadership group each year. The Head Coach would meet with the senior leaders at the same time each week and discussed all aspects of the program and training.

### **Succession and Talent ID**

Succession planning is a fundamental aspect of building a winning rugby squad. It involves identifying and developing talent within the team to ensure a smooth transition when key players retire or move on. Establishing a robust youth development program can be instrumental in nurturing future stars. Coaches should focus on identifying players with potential early on and providing them with the necessary resources and guidance to progress through the ranks. This proactive approach not only ensures a continuous influx of talent but also fosters a sense of competition within the squad, pushing players to consistently improve.

The piece that was missing is the establishment of a robust youth development program, in lieu of this the Waratahs had a larger than satisfactory pre-season block from start of November each year to Christmas (3 sessions a week plus S&C program) – up to 60 players made up from U16, U18 players as well as the best from the club program both City & Country. These players were identified through the Junior State Championships – attended by the Head Coach, and the club rep program – which was established at the start of the Super W program. The Head Coach as well as assistant coaches attend all training sessions for Country NSW and the club rep program.

This allowed the Waratahs to ensure they had the best 60 players in the State with each player given an equal opportunity to make the final squad of 30 players. Competition in this period was strong and Coaches were looking for good attitude from players and a willingness to work hard. This was backed up by the senior players from previous seasons.

The Waratahs over the past three seasons have introduced the youngest Waratahs player ever (male or female) from Sina Tuipulotu (17 years 163 days), Ella Koster (16 years 223 days) & Caitlyn Halse (16 years and 187 days) – this shows a true investment in youth and encourages and gives confidence to the young players throughout the State that they have a chance to play if they are talented enough.

The Waratahs believe that no other State comes close to this level of talent ID and investment for young female players.

Moreover, an effective succession plan involves the careful selection of team leaders. Captains and vice-captains play a pivotal role in shaping the teams culture and providing a strong foundation for future success. These leaders should embody the values and work ethic that the team aspires to uphold. By grooming potential leaders from within, a team can maintain continuity in its philosophy and approach, ensuring a smooth transition of leadership and minimizing disruptions. At the Waratahs there was one captain for the first five seasons and then a ready made replacement was brought through in 2023 – both subsequently became the Wallaroos captain.

### **Team Culture**

Team culture is a driving force behind the success of any rugby squad. Establishing a positive and cohesive culture is essential for fostering teamwork, communication, and resilience. Coaches and the leadership group defined a set of values that align with the teams identity and ensure that every player understands and embraces these principles. A strong team culture created a sense of belonging, motivating players to give their best for the collective success of the squad.

The Waratahs culture was based around being good people, hard work and winning. Some may say that winning shouldn't be part of the team culture and should be a product of it however it wasn't until 2 years into the program that the team started to play to win instead of playing not to lose – especially against QLD Reds. The leadership group were very insistent that winning be the centre of our culture. Everything the group would do would be geared to winning.

The leadership group drove the culture of the group and kept the group focused on all going in the same direction. The environment was a safe one for the whole group who could bring their whole selves to work. When a player wasn't comfortable or confident enough to come to one of the male coaching staff – they would approach one of the leadership group who would either help them immediately or raise it with senior staff.

### **Trust**

Trust is a cornerstone of successful rugby teams. Players must trust their teammates on and off the field, knowing that each member is committed to the common goal. Building trust requires open communication, transparency, and a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities. Coaches played a crucial role in facilitating trust by fostering an environment where players feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and concerns. Trust also extended to the coaching staff, as players need to have confidence in the strategies and decisions made by their coaches.

Due to the training and recruitment program, each player fully trusted their team mates to be there for them when they need it. This often shows up in defence during games and the Waratahs defence was always the best in the competition.

### **Consistent Training**

Consistent training is the backbone of a winning rugby squad. Regular and purposeful training sessions are vital for developing skills, improving fitness levels, and fine-tuning team dynamics. Waratahs coaches would design training programs that are specific to the teams strengths and weaknesses, focusing on areas that need improvement. There was always a balance between repetition and introducing new concepts or drills. Additionally, maintaining a balance between physical and mental conditioning is essential, as rugby is a physically demanding sport that also requires strategic thinking and mental resilience. The Waratahs had access to a mental skills coach in the last two seasons who was available to the players and staff.

Structured training routines contribute to the development of muscle memory and tactical awareness. Regular analysis of individual and team performances during training sessions allowed coaches to identify areas for improvement and tailor their coaching approach accordingly. Consistency in training not only enhances individual skills but also promotes cohesion within the team, as players become familiar with each others playing styles and tendencies.

Furthermore, incorporating variety into training sessions is crucial to keep players engaged and motivated. Drills that simulated game scenarios, combined with innovative exercises, enhanced adaptability and problem-solving skills. Additionally, creating a competitive yet supportive training environment encouraged healthy competition among players, pushing each individual to continuously strive for excellence.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, creating and maintaining a consistently winning rugby squad team requires a holistic approach that encompasses coach cohesion, succession planning, team culture, trust, and consistent training. A well-executed succession plan ensures a steady influx of talent and a seamless transition of leadership, while a strong team culture fosters unity, commitment, and resilience. Trust, built through open communication and shared values, forms the foundation for successful teamwork. Finally, consistent and purposeful training is the key to developing individual skills, enhancing team dynamics, and achieving sustained success on the rugby field. By prioritizing these key factors, the Waratahs positioned themselves for long-term success and create a legacy of excellence in the sport.

