

LEVEL III ASSESSMENT TASK 12

**COACHING JUNIOR RUGBY –
CORE SKILLS TRAINING**

V

**WINNING EMPHASIS
(SHOULD THERE BE A
DIFFERENCE?)**

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INTRODUCTION

There is always the question looming for the junior coach; do I emphasize core skill development or do I try and make the side a winning combination? I believe that both can be achieved, though it must be primarily through a core skill focus. This will create higher skilled individual players and in time provide a successful formula. Too often junior sides look to pass to the biggest, strongest player and let them do the rest. Whilst this may win a competition, it will ultimately be the downfall of that side.

This paper looks at this issue along with coaching implications to ensure that junior sides core skill development is the primary focus and how this can be transferred more efficiently and quickly.

COACHING JUNIOR RUGBY – CORE SKILLS TRAINING V WINNING EMPHASIS (SHOULD THERE BE A DIFFERENCE?)

As a junior rugby coach the dilemma is do you focus on individual skill development or do you look to mould a team to win games. I believe that both can be achieved provided the emphasis is on core skills. In my current coaching roles it is glaringly obvious that our players are not skilled in the basics. As a result, future National success is questionable as our current crop of junior players is not highly skilled. This paper will illustrate examples of this and look to provide possible ways forward.

It is easy for our coaches and players to watch the current stars and try to emulate the moves they see or the plays that unfold. A significant amount of training time is spent on practising these plays with little or no core skill error correction. Though the play may result in a favourable outcome occasionally, a players individual skills are not looked at as a focus.

There is much research to support this. A recent paper in the United Kingdom titled *Long Term Athletic Development* identified a number of main issues. It speaks of optimal trainability windows for young performers and how they are often missed. These reasons include:

- When young performers play too much and don't leave enough time or energy for quality training,
- If the development process becomes too focused on match results rather than how well individual players are improving.

source: Leeds Rugby Academy

There is always pressure on a team to perform, from the National team down. This a trap that junior coaches often fall into. As a result a junior side can often grind out a victory against potentially better opposition but at what cost? Core skill development is often overlooked and sacrificed to get the ball to the biggest and strongest player however possible; errors aren't relevant if the outcome is positive. Whilst this may be accepted at an elite level this cannot be the primary focus in junior rugby. No player develops, in particular the bigger, stronger player, as skeletal maturation rates vary dramatically and eventually they come back to the field. There have been several examples of this and players making elite senior teams, particularly in the early days of professionalism that had very poor core skills.

An example of the deficiency of core skills can be seen in *appendix 1*. It shows the results of a development night held in ACT for potential Open Schoolboy players in 2003. It shows that most players have little grasp of key areas, and the problem must be leveled at our junior coaches. In my early days as a junior coach I spent most of training time on patterns and plays with little or no error correction of a poor pass that hit the mark or a dropped ball. The players I coached may have improved as a side, but how many developed their own core skill proficiency as quickly or efficiently as was possible?

Having attended Super 12 training this year of two of the Australian sides, it is obvious that players even at this level still need to devote time to core skill training as many errors were evident. Research shows that to master a skill it takes considerable time and practice. The following table illustrates this.

SKILL	PRACTICE HOURS	TOTAL TIME
Football pass	1.4 million	15yr * 200d * 4hr * 2/min
Football punt	.8 million	200d * 5 days * 45wks * 15 yrs
Baseball throw	1.6 million	3/min * 80 mins * 300 days * 10 yrs
Netball shot	598,000 shots	200d * 5 days * 46 wks * 13 yrs

Source: Damien Farrow 2003

Though at times it can appear to be a tedious process it is vital for the success of elite rugby that this process is embraced from the earliest years up to test level. The challenge for junior coaches is to develop exciting, enjoyable ways to teach and improve these skills.

Earlier this year I attempted to have a look at this issue. In a four week, eight session trial I used three sides. The first group did all core skill training with the coach given specific areas to provide feedback to players. The second group did all game based training with feedback solely results based. The third did a combination of the two. Five players from each side were tested on two activities (*see appendix 2*) pre and post trial. The results showed that players in the third group developed better than the other two groups. Though this was only a short study it shows the value of specific feedback and core skills training, coupled with transferring it into a pressure, game based activity.

These tests were then modified and distributed to all junior coaches with instructions on how it should be implemented (*Appendix 3*). The results have been encouraging and a full season framework was conducted by my school side.

The qualitative and quantitative results were most encouraging. The side did a four week block practice in March, June and August of the two skill drills. The improvement was staggering and performance wise, the side after losing four of the first seven fixtures the side finished by winning its last four competition games. This can be attributed to many factors, though core skill transference was the major factor.

It is with this in mind junior coaches need to look at their approach to training. How best to incorporate core skill training ensuring that there is a high level of transfer in a game situation. There have been many studies on the notion of blocked (structured) v random (unstructured) with the main conclusion that purely random practice is not efficient in lower skilled athletes. (French, Rink and Werner 1990). Damien Farrow also supports this as the following table shows:

SKILL LEVEL	SKILL TYPE	PRACTICE	INTERFERENCE
BEGINNER	Open / closed	Blocked	Low
INTERMEDIATE	Open / closed	Blocked / random	Medium / High
ADVANCED	Open / closed	Random	High

Whilst I agree with most of this table based on the trials I have conducted this year, coupled with my observations of Super 12 and test players, I think a better model would be as follows:

SKILL LEVEL	SKILL TYPE	PRACTICE	INTERFERENCE
BEGINNER	Open / closed	Blocked / random	Low / Medium
INTERMEDIATE	Open / closed	Blocked / random	Low / Medium / High
ADVANCED	Open / closed	Random / blocked	Low / Medium / High

Appendix 4 is a model that I have been trialing this year with much success at a school team level. It looks at core skills with definite feedback descriptors, coupled with unstructured training, for example, a modified game with one core skill being the primary focus. This should ensure that transfer is quicker for players and skill levels improve accordingly. This is supported when looking at the area of specificity and transfer. *“Transfer of practice to game conditions depends on the extent to which practice resembles the game” (Magill 1998).*

A good core skill focus in junior rugby, rather than simply a must win attitude, will give the desired results anyway. Though success may not be as quick, the long term benefits for each individual player cannot be underestimated. Instant accurate feedback on error correction and having players providing their own feedback will ensure that skill levels increase, thus ensuring a more competitive and successful side. It is important to question players about their core skill performance for them to start to develop their own thought processes in regards to their own performance of a skill. This is known as implicit learning that is *acquisition of a skill without concurrent development of verbalizable knowledge about how to perform a skill. (Damien Farrow 2004)*

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I have been coaching 'elite' senior schoolboys for some time now and it never ceases to amaze at how poor a significant number of them are in the basic rugby skills; catch/pass, defence and breakdown skills. These players have got through junior rugby without grasping the core skills. This is potentially a major problem facing Australian Rugby unless a National Core Skills program is investigated. The ARU have looked at this with the introduction of the Elite Player Development Program though this is only a small part of the solution as it begins at 15 years of age. Junior coaches and players at all levels need to be working on individual skill development, through core skills and modified game situations rather than solely winning. A national framework and the coach education program need further implementation at all levels.

To ensure that we move forward as a skilled rugby nation, practice and emphasis from the earliest junior levels upwards need to be on core skill development, coupled with modified games. Transfer of these skills need to be of importance though correct technique must be the primary focus in the early years. Bringing in unstructured training activities with a high level of specific, immediate feedback will decrease skill transference time and must also be done at an earlier age. Unstructured training games also increase the enjoyment for players. This will ensure that we develop a nation of thinking, proactive players with a high core skill base.

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