
PLAN THE SEASON PLAN

By Daniel Atkins

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO HAVE A SEASON PLAN?

Having a Season Plan is essential for coaches to strategize methods and plans and to implement the Team or Clubs objectives, milestones and goals for the season.

This paper is based on my rugby coaching experiences and the lessons I have learned over my 12 years of coaching rugby at senior premier amateur club level.

Planning for the Season Plan, involves planning through these simple steps:

- Goal Setting
- Technical and Tactical
- Season Stages

Every year I plan through the above steps through workshopping and engaging the Club's Coaches, Club Captains, important stakeholders and other necessary club officials to form the overall 'Season Master Plan'.

WHERE TO START?

Developing a Season Plan begins at the end of the previous season and can start as early as a few weeks after the season has ended. In my opinion, every coach team or club should always undertake a post-season review or lessons learned to understand what went right, what went wrong and what or where are the main areas for improvement. From this activity, not only can we understand where or what areas we need to focus on for the season but our first goals could also be realised.

GOAL SETTING

So how important is it to set team goals? How often do you hear coaches respond to the question about what the team's goals are for the year with "win a grand final" or "to get through a season without any major injuries" Of course every team would like to have those goals materialise and do usually set those goals but how achievable are they?

The benefits for setting specific measurable short term and long term goals for the season can provide direction, focus, motivation and could also have a positive effect and improve the team's culture. Setting individual player goals can also add benefit to the team's goals. An example of an individual player goals that may have a direct interdependency on the team's goal could be "to have a goal kicking success rate of 85%". If the player's goal is successful it could lead to the team's overall performance goal of "winning 8 of our 10 games" which could also lead into another of the team's goals of "making the season semi finals'.

Undertaking an exercise of identifying and developing individual goals, could be a lengthy exercise, especially if you are involved with a club that is made up of several grade teams. Try to generalise and categorise individual goal examples and use online survey systems which can sometimes be free or no cost depending how detailed you make the survey. After you have completed the survey, pick three to five most common and highest rated goals in terms of importance from all the players that participated in the survey and set those as the individual team/club goals.

For team / club goals undertake the same exercise as the individual goals, providing the survey with goal examples to choose from. The examples could mostly be used from the previous year's survey, instead of having to create or develop new examples for the survey.

Once the season goals are set, the season target points can be planned and scheduled. Planning and development of trainings and game plans for Pre-Season, In-Season and Post-Season can be undertaken.

Season goals should be developed and agreed with realistic, attainable and measurable milestones but also should be challenging for the players. If the players do not feel challenged by the goals they might just see these goals as unnecessary or even just club bureaucratic propaganda. If you want to ensure the players are committed, are driven and excited by challenges and tasks, set season goals!

Finally, review the goals. Review the goals together with your players Pre-Season, In-Season and Post-Season. If the goals have not been reached at any time, work out and agree a plan on how they can be achieved. If the goals have been reached, reward and celebrate!

GOAL SETTING CONTINUED.....

TECHNICAL AND TACTICAL DEVELOPMENT

Development of the Technical and Tactical plans are the crucial plans for the '5 Ws' - What, Who When, Where, Why and then the How. The Technical and Tactical plans essentially become the team or club's blueprint or some club's call it the 'Playbook or Handbook'.

A base or platform Playbook to leverage off, needs to be set and in place. It is not absolutely necessary that a team / club does not have a current Playbook. Some teams or clubs probably function just fine developing the season plans with what is in front but producing seasonal Technical and Tactical plan from previously documented information and tweaking to what aligns best with the seasons goals, lessons learned from the previous season and with the 'cattle' (current player stock and quality) is more efficient, saves reinventing ideas and can be left for future incoming coaches to use.

Using some very simple rugby game elements such as Technical, Style and Physical elements are easy starting points to build technical and tactical plans from. Below are some examples of the elements that could be used or addressed in a season Playbook.

TECHNICAL

- Rucking – No. of players to be committed to rucks. Cleanout and sealing – go beyond the ruck or lock down and seal the ruck
- Mauling – Structure. Set piece only, in contact, from a pick and go and where etc
- Set Piece – Lineout structure
- Restarts – Kick receipts – setting up players in the channels and split set up
- Structures – Shape of play – Play off 9 or 10 or use an arrow shape each phase. Defensive structures
- Unstructured – Turnover of ball in Defence

STYLE – PHILOSOPHY AND STYLE OF RUGBY

- Fast or slow paced game
- Play everything in the oppositions half or play what is in front
- Continuous offloading at the contact or play a structured rucking set piece style

MENTAL

- Game preparations
- Feedback and reviewing

PHYSICAL

- Fitness – Pre-Season & In-Season
- Strength – Gym programs
- Speed – Short speed work. Milestones for speed programs
- Power – Position specific

Planning the Technical and Tactical in-season plan can be quite a daunting thought process but being organised and in control of what Technical and Tactical elements will be implemented, will gain and keep the respect of all players and coaches. Players don't want a disorganised coach that shoots the key play elements from the hip. Players need to know what they will be training and playing towards, even if it is the unstructured unpredictable style of 'play what is in front of you'.

SEASON STAGES

PRE-SEASON

Preparing yourself! Preparing your coaching staff and your players for the upcoming season is an essential step to making the season a successfully run one. Pre-season planning is the initial step towards achieving those goals you have already set.

Pre-season planning can be made much simpler if the previous steps of Goal Setting and Technical and Tactical planning activities have been completed. Depending on the level or capability of the players, pre-season should focus on the physical and technical skills and elements. Pre-season should be about conditioning the players, through a various spread of technical drills that have elements of fitness to them such as power, strength, speed and endurance. Tactical training should come into the later part of the pre-season training and accelerate into the early parts of the In-season stage. Too much focus on Tactical ahead of Technical could result in having your players entering into the first rounds of the season under-conditioned, unfit for the level of football played to be sustained over an entire game, resulting into early season injuries. Inevitably to counter all of these issues, you end up overtraining your players to try and catch up their fitness levels in line with the opposition teams.

Plan for the Pre-season stage, begin by breaking the process down a little from what you already know:

GOALS

- What are our core goals for this season?
- What are player individual goals for this season?
- What did we learn from last season?
- Are there any other specific areas that need to be included?

TECHNICAL AND TACTICAL

- Are any of the goals for this season specific aligned to Technical or Tactical elements?
- How can the goal/s be implemented in trainings? Refer to current Playbook or identify and develop specific drills for the goal/s?
- What are or is the style you want your team to play?

OTHER ELEMENTS

- Physical areas such as Power, Speed and Endurance and how these elements can also be progressed through Goals, Technical and Tactical.

The final step to building the Pre-Season Plan are the timeframe/s you would like to set as a Milestones. Usually, 6 to 8 weeks is a good timeframe target to ensure the basic physical conditioning and fitness levels are built up, the early Goals and Technical elements are understood whilst introducing the small amounts of the Tactical and in-season 'style of play'.

With your Pre-season planning confirmed, outlined and the pathway established for achieving the Pre-season objectives, the weekly training plans can easily be developed.

SEASON STAGES CONTINUED.....

IN-SEASON

In-Season planning is relatively the easiest of all the planning tasks. In-season planning focuses mainly around the areas of Style, Technical and Tactical as well as monitoring and maintaining physical fitness levels.

Weekly training plans will be team specific focusing on the areas for improvement from the previous week (game), strategic goal for the upcoming game, unit work and final team runs but they should also ensure the season goals are not lost and elements of the season goals are reiterated and progressed.

Talk and communicate regularly throughout the In-season with your coaching staff and players about the season goals. It may be necessary to reset or modify the current goals. If the season goals are not aligned with the weekly training plans, players will lose focus of the end goal and will start to reinvent personal goals which will inevitably divide the team.

POST-SEASON

Post-Season is essentially where it all begins again! With the next season planning sessions. This is where you, your coaching staff and senior club players review the previous season goals and also what went well in the season, what might have gone wrong, why and how did things go good and bad and identifying the areas for improvement.

Seek feedback and provide data on the season goals through an end of season survey. Conducting the post season is a great way of reengaging with your club and shows faith in your club and players that you really value their opinions.

CONCLUSION

Setting milestones, analysing and planning the options and scenarios and executing tasks will make it easier to plan for the unexpected. An effective Season Plan will not always go to plan. Most often plans will change but knowing how to deal with change through mitigation measures and planned solutions will help you quickly resolve those unexpected issues.

Discuss, workshop, create and implement a Season Plan with your coaches and work with your club / team players to identify the Season Goals. Your team will collaborate and join together. They will work together towards achieving their individual and the club / team goals.

Plan your Season Plan. It's a better plan to having no plan!