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TASK # 7

The Unglamorous Art of Development Coaching – Coaching with Less, Achieving More

Introduction: The Road Less Travelled

In the modern rugby landscape, ambitious coaches face a critical choice: pursue high-profile roles at well-resourced clubs with elite talent or embrace development coaching with underachieving teams operating on minimal budgets.

The Development Coaching Reality

For the purposes of this paper, the concepts discussed will focus on club and school rugby programs. While the case studies referenced come from professional rugby, the principles and frameworks apply directly to these grassroots levels where development coaching is most critical—and most challenging.

There is no doubt that recruitment and retention of players at both club and school levels are important and a necessity to be competitive and successful. However, this paper addresses a different reality: **What happens when you cannot simply recruit a team of stars?** What happens when the elite talent in your region gravitates toward better-resourced programs? What happens when your club operates on fundraising barbecues while opponents have wealthy benefactors? What happens when your school's rugby budget is a fraction of the private schools you compete against?

How do you approach coaching a team or program where success must be built through genuine player development rather than talent acquisition? More critically, how do you approach a coaching role that quite frankly no one wants—positions often placed in the 'too hard basket' due to lack of resources, funding, or institutional support? These are the jobs where predecessors lasted a single season, where facilities are inadequate, where parents openly question the program, and where expectations somehow remain unrealistically high despite systematic underinvestment.

A Personal Journey

As an aspirational coach without a professional playing background, I have been fortunate to embrace two development roles that have been enormously transformational in my coaching journey.

At the age of 29, I became the Director of Rugby at Brisbane State High School (BSHS). BSHS is a proud member of the Queensland GPS schools association with esteemed success, history, and tradition. As the only state school in a private school competition, BSHS provided me with the unique opportunity to learn how to compete creatively against private boys' schools with vastly superior resources, facilities, and recruitment reach.

I later had the privilege of coaching Colts (under-20s) and subsequently becoming First Grade head coach at Norths Rugby Club in Brisbane at the age of 36. Norths is the club I am proud to have played for, and leading its development has been one of the most rewarding challenges of my career. These roles have allowed me to test, refine, and

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validate the principles outlined in this paper—to discover firsthand whether superior coaching craft can genuinely create competitive advantages when resources are limited.

As I continue to navigate these experiences, I have developed a deep fascination with how coaches can create sustainable success through intentional practice and sophisticated methodology. This paper represents my attempt to synthesise what I have learned, drawing on both my practical experiences and my research into coaching pedagogy. My hope is that it provides another coach facing the realities of community rugby—whether at club or school level—with practical frameworks, renewed optimism, and the confidence that development coaching is not a compromise but a genuine pathway to both team success and professional growth.

The Central Argument

This paper argues that coaches willing to take "the long way"—developing players rather than recruiting them—can build sustainable programs and distinguished reputations even with limited resources. By mastering the craft that many consider unfashionable, development coaches create competitive advantages where none appear to exist. The professional case studies demonstrate what's possible; the frameworks that follow show how to achieve it at club and school levels where most coaches actually operate.

The Development Coaching Framework: Four Interdependent Pillars

This framework explores four interdependent pillars that enable development-minded coaches to outperform higher-resourced programs:

1. **Vision** – Defining what your environment will look, sound, and feel like
2. **People** – Identifying those who will bring the vision to life
3. **Methodology** – Maximising every player's potential through superior pedagogy
4. **Leadership** – Empowering player leaders with clear portfolios and ownership

Each pillar interconnects with the others, creating a system where coaching expertise becomes the decisive competitive advantage.

Pillar 1: Vision – Defining Your Identity

Setting the Foundation

When Connacht won the 2016 Pro12 championship, they became only the seventh team to claim the title and secured their first major trophy in 131 years of history. This wasn't accidental. When professional rugby began, Connacht received only half the budget of other Irish provinces and were labelled a 'development team'. Yet under Pat Lam's vision, they systematically built an identity that would shock Irish giants Leinster in the final.

You have taken on a job coaching a team that hasn't performed in recent times. In many ways, it's a blank canvas. The first part of this process as the leader is to set the vision for the group.

The Vision-Setting Framework

Week 1-2: Articulate Your Core Vision

Ask yourself these guiding questions:

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- **What does success look like?** Be specific: "Our team will be recognised for defensive line speed and communication quality" or "Players will demonstrate superior decision-making in the final 20 minutes."
- **What are the small wins we can achieve short term?** Identify measurable improvements within the first month that build confidence and momentum.
- **How will we achieve this?** Define the specific training methodologies and session structures that will produce these outcomes.
- **What do we want our environment to look, feel, and sound like?** Consider both internal culture (how players interact, communicate, and hold each other accountable) and external perception (how opponents and observers describe your team).
- **Who are the people who can help bring this to life?** Identify specific individuals with complementary skills and vision alignment.

Beyond the Field

The team and club should ultimately reflect your beliefs and philosophies. What people see when your teams arrive at games matters. How do players present themselves to others? On field, how do you want your team to play? What characteristics will identify your team as distinctively yours?

Eddie Jones, when coaching Japan, became expert at creating memorable catchphrases that penetrated team culture. He understood that vision isn't just written on a whiteboard—it must be communicated relentlessly until it becomes embedded in every player's thinking.

Vision in Action: Japan 2015

When Eddie Jones was appointed Japan head coach in 2012 to lead them to the 2015 Rugby World Cup, he inherited a team with the poorest World Cup winning record. Jones framed the challenge simply: "It's David vs Goliath. They've got the greatest winning record in World Cup history. We've got the least winning record, and we're the smallest team". Yet Jones's vision was clear: gain respect for Japanese rugby by competing intelligently against physically superior opponents.

At the 2015 Rugby World Cup, Japan achieved an upset victory over South Africa with a last-minute try, finishing 34-32. They became the first nation to record three pool-stage victories while failing to advance to the knockout stage. The vision had materialised—Japanese rugby had earned global respect through intelligent play rather than physical dominance.

Pillar 2: People – Assembling Your Coaching Team

The Myth of Individual Brilliance

Royle (2019, p. 15) argues, "Modern coaching has changed. Winning in the current landscape is not about your individual brilliance; it's derived from your ability to elicit collective greatness from a multidisciplinary team." For development coaches with limited resources, this truth becomes even more critical.

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The Strategic Recruitment Framework

Week 3-4: Build Your Coaching Staff

Step	Action
1. Identify Required Skill Sets	Attack, defence, set piece, strength & conditioning, medical, team manager
2. Articulate the Vision	Explicitly communicate your program vision to every potential staff member. Gauge both understanding and genuine commitment.
3. Assess Vision Alignment	Ask two critical questions: (a) Does this individual understand and commit to the program's vision? (b) Will they challenge established practices and provide honest feedback during difficult periods?
4. Balance Individual Strengths	Deliberately seek individuals whose strengths compensate for your weaknesses, creating a balanced leadership team rather than hiring people similar to you.
5. Establish a Second Set of Eyes	Identify someone—with or without rugby background—who can monitor your interactions, provide honest feedback, and ensure continual growth.

Royle (2019, p. 22) warns that "individualism cripples you and your organization," making complementary personalities and diverse perspectives essential rather than optional.

The Truth Teller Principle

Eddie Jones exemplifies this principle through his employment of Neil Craig as a 'truth teller' during Rugby World Cups with both England and Australia (Jones and McRae, 2021). Jones emphasises: "If you haven't got that in your organisation you've got to get it" (Jones and McRae, 2021, p. 87).

Practically, this means establishing a formal 'second set of eyes'—whether an experienced external mentor or an empowered assistant coach—who possesses both the expertise and permission to challenge your thinking. Royle (2019, p. 8) dismantles "the biggest myth in coaching"—that "you can do it all yourself"—arguing that elite coaches require their own coaches to reach peak performance.

The Reality of Resource-Constrained Programs

Programs with fewer resources require significantly more time and energy. As Head Coach, the temptation is to do everything yourself. However, all coaches have blind spots. At club and school levels, head coaches often juggle family responsibilities, full-time employment outside rugby, or full teaching loads. This busy reality means coaches inevitably neglect some program areas.

A second set of eyes doesn't require a rugby background—it requires someone who can offer suggestions, monitor your organizational effectiveness, and ensure continuous improvement. As Royle (2019, p. 203) concludes, "When you get better, everyone gets better," but this collective improvement only occurs when every staff member is aligned, empowered, and committed to bringing the vision to life through complementary strengths rather than individual heroics.

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Pillar 3: Methodology – Your Unfair Advantage

Why Pedagogy is Your Competitive Advantage

The 2015 Highlanders pack contained no All Blacks—just good rugby players who were gritty and determined, refusing to take a backward step. They didn't outmuscle opponents; they outthought them. In an era where all players can access similar strength and conditioning programs and technical skill development, tactical intelligence has become rugby's "Moneyball"—the undervalued commodity that separates competitive teams from elite ones.

While physical attributes and basic skills can be replicated across programs, the ability to develop players who read the game, anticipate patterns, and make superior decisions under pressure represents a genuine point of difference achievable only through sophisticated coaching pedagogy. **This is the coaching superpower:** transforming average athletes into tactically astute competitors through intentional session design.

Teaching vs. Running Sessions

Development coaches have a fundamental responsibility to **teach players the game of rugby**, not merely run training sessions. This distinction is critical. Coaching is teaching, and effective teaching demands deliberate application of learning science principles (Lemov 2021).

Tactical astuteness emerges only when session design structures align precisely with how players acquire, retain, and transfer knowledge. Lemov's (2021) principle that "practice makes permanent" (Lemov, Woolway & Yezzi 2012, p. 3) demands that every training minute intentionally encodes correct tactical understanding rather than reinforcing errors or confusion.

Modern Coaching Pedagogies

Game-Based Approach: Modified scenarios develop decision-making and tactical awareness through authentic problem-solving (Light 2013).

Constraints-Based Coaching: Manipulating space, numbers, rules, and equipment guides players to discover effective solutions rather than prescribing rigid techniques (Renshaw et al. 2019).

However, these methodologies only produce tactically astute players when embedded within robust teaching structures.

Practical Session Design Template Integrating Teaching Principles

Week 5-8: Implement This Session Architecture

Preview (3 minutes)

Prime cognitive schemas using video clips or whiteboard diagrams—showing defensive line speed principles and specific decision triggers. Establish consistent technical vocabulary (e.g., "press trigger" vs "drift cue") that will be reinforced throughout the session, enabling clear mental models.

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Episode 1 - Whole-Part-Whole Structure (12 minutes)

- **Whole (4 min):** 7v7 game snap—attacking team has 2 minutes to score from lineout 22m out, defenders must identify and communicate attacking shape cues. Coach observes decision-making patterns to diagnose learning needs.
- **Part (4 min):** Isolated constraint drill addressing observed deficiencies—defenders work in units of 3, focusing on drift speed with reduced channel width (8m) forcing faster scanning. Coach provides immediate, specific feedback: "You read the flat alignment and drifted—correct. Name the cue that triggered that decision."
- **Whole (4 min):** Return to 7v7 game snap with same scenario. Players apply refined defensive reads with coach checking for understanding through targeted questions: "What did you see? What did that tell you to do?"

Episode 2 - Constraints-Based Attack (10 minutes)

Modified game: 6v6 touch rugby with progressive constraints:

- Attacking team must complete 3 passes before crossing gain line (encouraging width and depth)
- Defenders cannot move forward until ball carrier crosses 5m line (creating space manipulation opportunities)
- Ball carrier must verbalise defensive picture to support players before passing (externalising tactical thinking for coach assessment)
- Randomise starting positions and defensive alignments to prevent pattern memorisation and encourage genuine reading of the game

Review (3 minutes)

Consolidate learning through deliberate questioning: "What defensive cues told you to drift versus press? How did communicating the picture change your support players' decisions? When might you see this pattern in Saturday's match?" This transfers tactical knowledge to long-term memory and bridges to game application.

Why This Works

This systematic methodology creates tactically astute players who anticipate, adapt, and execute superior decisions—capabilities impossible to replicate through talent acquisition alone:

- **Preview processes** activate prior knowledge and establish learning objectives
- **Episodic structures** of 8-12 minutes maintain cognitive engagement
- **Consistent vocabulary** creates shared tactical language
- **Immediate specific feedback** corrects errors before they become permanent
- **Randomised practice** prevents rote memorisation while building genuine pattern recognition
- **Review processes** verify understanding and consolidate transfer (Lemov 2021)

When session design deliberately aligns with these teaching and learning principles, player development in tactical intelligence becomes systematic rather than accidental.

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The True Point of Difference

Methodology becomes the competitive advantage when every team has access to similar physical resources. The development coach's pedagogical sophistication—their ability to teach the game through intentionally designed learning environments—represents the true point of difference in modern rugby. Money cannot buy this expertise; it can only be developed through years of deliberate practice in coaching craft.

Pillar 4: Leadership – Empowering Player Ownership

The Leadership Multiplier

Strong and effective leadership can make any group outperform their opposition over the course of a year. The challenge for the development coach is setting up the environment to educate and empower players to lead.

The Leadership Portfolio System

Week 9-12: Implement Player Leadership Structure

Step	Action
1. Identify Leaders	Select players of high character and high influence who will be responsible for bringing the vision to life. Look beyond traditional captaincy qualities to find authentic influencers.
2. Assign Portfolios	Give each member of the playing leadership group a specific 'portfolio'—an area of importance they will be responsible for driving.
3. Define Four Core Portfolios	Standards & Accountability, Social & Cohesion, Technical & Tactical, Logistics
4. Explicitly Outline Requirements	Provide clear expectations, resources, and authority for each portfolio.

Portfolio Definitions and Responsibilities

Portfolio	Role and Responsibilities
Standards & Accountability	Educate, establish, and hold all members accountable for behaviours expected on and off the field. This includes punctuality, training intensity, recovery protocols, and community representation. These leaders address breaches immediately and privately.
Social & Cohesion	Foster a sense of belonging and connection to the community in all members. Organise social events, ensure new members feel welcomed, identify players struggling with integration, and maintain team culture during challenging periods.
Technical & Tactical	Game Drivers. Responsible for weekly game plan input, providing coaches with feedback around training and game week approaches. They identify tactical patterns during review sessions and communicate opposition analysis to teammates.
Logistics	Manage match day routines, travel arrangements, pre-game timings, equipment needs, and logistical problem-solving. They

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Portfolio

Role and Responsibilities

ensure the team environment runs smoothly so coaches and players can focus on performance.

Why Portfolios Create Competitive Advantage

In resource-constrained environments, coaches cannot oversee every operational detail. The portfolio system:

- **Distributes ownership** across the playing group, creating investment in team success
- **Develops leadership capacity** beyond traditional captain roles
- **Creates accountability systems** that don't rely solely on coaching staff
- **Builds organisational resilience** when key players or coaches are unavailable
- **Empowers players** to solve problems rather than simply identifying them

Most importantly, portfolio leaders operating effectively make your program less dependent on coaching brilliance and more dependent on collective excellence—the only sustainable model for development programs.

First 90 Days Roadmap:

- **Week 1-2:** Vision articulation and stakeholder alignment
- **Week 3-4:** Staff identification and recruitment
- **Week 5-8:** Establish methodology and session design templates
- **Week 9-12:** Leadership portfolio implementation

After this initial investment, these systems compound. Your second season requires half the setup time. Your third season runs almost automatically.

Build Your Reputation on Process: Even if results don't arrive at one club, coaches who demonstrate sophisticated methodology, vision-aligned staff development, and player leadership systems will attract opportunities at programs that value genuine development.

Evidence from the Field: Case Studies in Development Coaching

Case Study 1: The Highlanders (2015)

The Challenge: Operating as the southernmost major professional team, the Highlanders committed to building teams primarily from local talent while shunning expensive recruitment.

The Approach: Under coach Jamie Joseph, the 2015 forward pack contained no All Blacks, just good rugby players who were gritty and determined. They focused on developing collective tactical intelligence and defensive resilience.

The Outcome: They became the first team to win Super Rugby having failed to win a conference and having competed in the qualifying round, defeating the favoured Hurricanes before 35,000 fans in Wellington.

The Lesson: Development programs can defeat talent-rich opponents when coaching methodology creates tactical superiority that money cannot buy.

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Case Study 2: Connacht Rugby (2015-16)

The Challenge: When professional rugby began, Connacht received only half the budget of other Irish provinces and were labelled a 'development team'. They had not won at Munster's Thomond Park for 29 years.

The Approach: Under Pat Lam's third season in charge, Connacht implemented a clear game plan and developed cohesive team structures. They focused on collective improvement rather than individual recruitment.

The Outcome: Connacht finished second in the regular season, qualified for playoffs for the first time, and defeated Leinster 20-10 in the final to claim their first trophy in 131 years. The upset drew comparisons with Premier League side Leicester City's triumph in the same season.

The Lesson: Systematic development through superior coaching can overcome decades of institutional disadvantage and resource constraints.

Case Study 3: Japan Rugby (2012-15)

The Challenge: Japan had won just one World Cup match between 1987 and 2011. They had the least successful World Cup record and were the smallest team competing.

The Approach: Eddie Jones brought in more Japanese-born players and implemented a fast-ruck style of play. He created memorable catchphrases that penetrated team culture and repeated messages until players embraced them on the field. Training camps began with weight sessions at 5am, establishing non-negotiable standards.

The Outcome: Japan defeated South Africa 34-32 with a last-minute try, and became the first nation to record three pool-stage victories while failing to qualify for knockouts. They transformed from World Cup laughingstock to globally respected rugby nation.

The Lesson: Clear vision, relentless communication, and superior tactical preparation enable physically smaller teams to defeat traditional powerhouses through intelligent rugby.

Measuring Development Success Beyond Win-Loss

Development coaches must demonstrate progress even before results fully materialise. Implement these measurement systems:

Player Development Metrics

- **Tactical Decision-Making Assessments:** Regular game-footage review with scoring rubrics for decision quality under pressure
 - **Individual Skill Progression Tracking:** Pre- and post-season measurements for technical execution
 - **Game Intelligence Growth:** Players' ability to articulate tactical concepts and identify opposition patterns
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Conclusion: The Satisfaction and Career Value of Development Coaching

For the dedicated coach willing to master their craft, this approach offers a proven pathway to both team success and professional distinction.

The satisfaction derived from development coaching is unique. It stems not from acquiring pre-existing talent but from successfully engineering the growth of players deemed inadequate or overlooked. The reward lies in witnessing systematic player improvement become inevitable and transforming a previously underperforming program into a competitive force.

The Professional Distinction

Here's what many ambitious coaches fail to recognise: **this approach doesn't just build competitive teams; it establishes your reputation as a genuine developer of people—the foundation for advancement to any coaching role you desire.**

Elite programs increasingly seek coaches who can develop players, not simply manage stars. When you demonstrate the ability to create tactical intelligence in average athletes, to build cohesive staff cultures with limited resources, and to empower player leadership that sustains program excellence, you become invaluable.

The development path isn't the career dead-end many perceive. Eddie Jones moved from Japan to become England's first foreign head coach and secured a four-year deal leading them to the 2019 Rugby World Cup final. Jamie Joseph's success with the Highlanders led to seven years coaching Japan's national team. Pat Lam's Connacht championship launched him to Bristol Bears. These coaches built reputations not by purchasing talent but by creating it.

The Ultimate Achievement

The ultimate professional distinction is achieved when you create a sustainable program where every player leaves significantly better than when they arrived. This is coaching mastery—the unglamorous art that money cannot buy, talent cannot replicate, and time cannot shortcut.

When you choose the long way, you're not settling for less. You're choosing to build something genuine, sustainable, and entirely your own. You're proving that superior coaching craft will always outperform superior resources. You're demonstrating that the real competitive advantage in rugby isn't found in budgets or recruitment—it's found in the daily discipline of teaching the game better than anyone else.

This is the unglamorous art of development coaching: transforming limitation into advantage, coaching with less to achieve more.

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