

## The Challenges of a Game Based Approach

Rugby Australia introduced the concept of a game-based approach (GBA) in the late 90s but didn't commit to the education process fully till 2017, and whilst this decision has been hugely successful, there are still many Australian coaches that struggle with this direction.

Straight away, any coach that gained their accreditation before 2017 would have done so generally based on the old, skills and drills mentality. Additionally, coaches that may have been brought up "old school" and subsequently started their formal journey, tend to struggle with this new way of doing things.

Whilst I will touch on the theory and benefits of the whole-part-whole coaching process, this is introduced to all Foundation Coaches and above. Most people would be familiar with the Professor Shane Pill – Play with Purpose (Flinders University). This is a cornerstone of our coach education.



This paper is focused on the challenges faced by coaches, in both the performance and Community coaching space.

The first thing I would say is if you are struggling with the concept and you did your accreditation some time ago, put the ego aside. Enrol in a Foundation or Level 2 course and fully commit to the process. The coach education space in Australia is proactive and evolving.

So, the challenges are (but not limited to):

1. What is the game?
2. Player Engagement
3. Variety (is the spice of life?)
4. Skill Acquisition
5. Skill Execution
6. Fitness and Conditioning
7. Tactical
8. Individual needs
9. Time Management
10. Injury Risk
11. Assessment and Feedback

## 1. What is the game?

The Oxford Dictionary defines it as:

*noun*

1. An activity that one engages in for amusement or fun.
2. A complete episode or period of play, ending in a final result.

The Britannica Dictionary lists it as:

A game is any mental or physical activity with rules that is done for fun, such as physical activities like Rugby

Cambridge Dictionary:

An entertaining activity or sport,

The common themes are enjoyment and a competition where there is a final result. So based on that, does it need to be a game of rugby? Yes, and no...

Probably the biggest stress for a community coach is, what game do I play with 7 players at training? Whereas, in a performance environment, the stress is more likely to be around keeping the whole squad engaged.

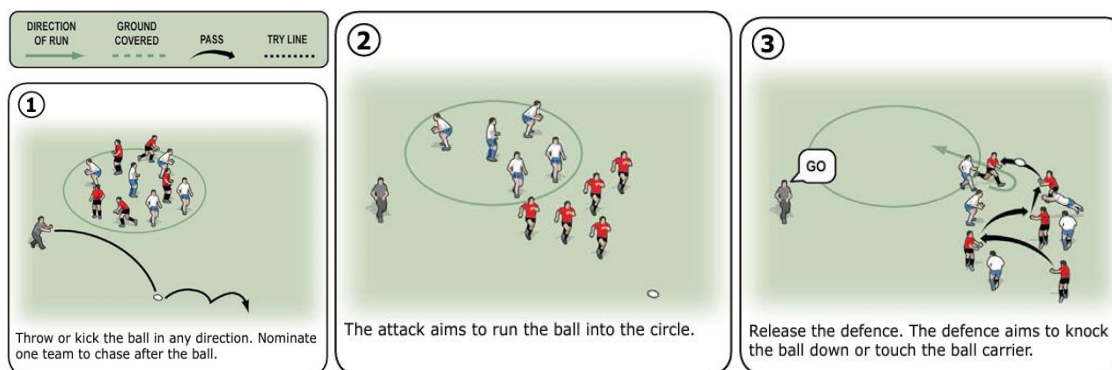
For a community coach, consider what the outcome of the session is, and how that can be achieved with fewer numbers. With limited numbers, a full-on game of rugby isn't possible, could it be a modified version of touch rugby? Small-sided games are a great way of engaging the players, providing a whole-part-whole environment, whilst still hitting your training plan targets.

For example, your training plan might have a 'finding space' focus. The below small game can have anywhere between 6 and 14 players.

360-degree attack - Challenging the players to find space.

Players need to think outside their comfort zone. This game creates a new scenario, attacking a circle, that most won't be familiar with. It requires many of the handling and movement skills used in rugby and allows slower players to contribute with faster players.

Set up Players: Maximum 7 v 7. Area: 14m diameter circle. Equipment: One ball.



Ref: Better Rugby Coaching

## Level 4 - Written Assignment



Chris Noble

Game notes:

- Start with touch tackling.
- Give the attack a time limit, say 30 seconds, to get the ball back into the circle.
- An attacker must have the ball when he enters the circle. The ball cannot be thrown in.
- The attack finishes if a try is scored, the ball is knocked down or dropped, or the ball carrier is touched

Score:

- 4 points for a try.
- 1 point to the defence for every 10m from the circle the ball was either knocked down, dropped or the ball carrier was touched in possession.

What to call out:

- "Run to spaces in attack"
- "Pass away from danger"

Coaching Notes:

- The attack might need to go away from the circle to find space and to spread the defence.
- Sometimes let both teams out of the circle together, to contest for the ball. Make this variation full contact, with the attack finishing when the ball carrier is brought to his knees, rather than when he is touched

This is just one example of hundreds on the internet, including RA's own Coaching Hub. If you are a community coach, do not be afraid to reach out to your MU for help.

The challenges of a performance coach, on the other hand, are things like keeping all players active and providing variety. Next session you run, count the number of times a winger or fullback touches the ball in your "Games". The result may shock you.

As you observe players playing the game you designed, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do all players like and/or participate in the game?
- Did you achieve the goal of the game?
- Have all players been challenged? (Is it too difficult, too easy, or one-sided?)

If the answer is 'no', then CHANGE IT!

## 2. Player Engagement

While games are generally more engaging, some players may struggle with the pressure and competitive nature of constant game scenarios. Maintaining a positive and constructive training environment is essential.

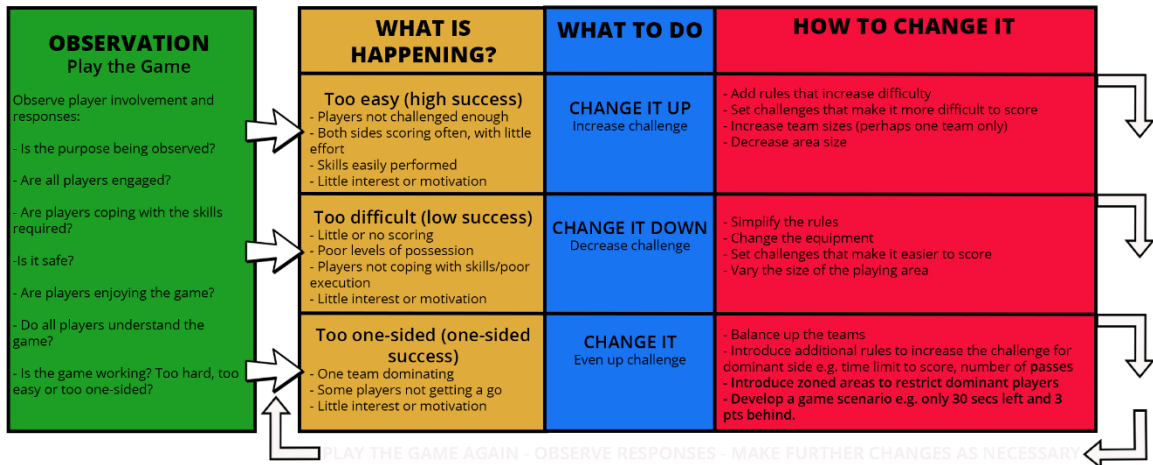
As previously touched on, how often do you see the same players migrate to the edges or are just happy to be the support runner? Community rugby is rife with this type of player, and then the coach wonders why they can't execute a skill or play in a real game.

The CHANGE IT acronym is used extensively within our coach development framework, and for good reason.

## Level 4 - Written Assignment



Chris Noble



Ref: Rugbytoolbox.co.nz

Why not swap all the forwards for all the backs one night? Yes, the results might be immediately chaotic, and not necessarily productive (initially). But consider the upsides, there will be a fair bit of banter and laughs. The players will also gain a newfound respect for their fellow teammates. And you never know, that play out the back that you need a forward to do under pressure, might just be enhanced by them playing in the centres occasionally.

The other opportunity that community coaches (and junior) have is, to quietly pull your dominant players aside and instruct them to not touch the ball, or be a support player only. This does not have to be obvious, to avoid embarrassing any novice players.

### 3. Variety

There's a risk of falling into repetitive game patterns if not enough variety is introduced. Coaches need to continually find new and creative ways to challenge players within the game-based framework.

Introduce variety in training settings and challenges. This could involve changes in pitch size, player numbers, or specific game scenarios. Adapting to different conditions helps players become more versatile and adaptable.

### 4. Skill Acquisition

Certain positions in rugby require specialized skills. A game-based approach might not always allow players to focus on position-specific skills as much as they need to. This should be considered a barrier to a games-based approach, rather engage your players to Individual skill blocks within your training.

If the game you are using isn't working, then change it up, who said you need to use the same game within one training session? Break it down into small-sided games to focus on specific skills within the context of a match. For example, you can create scenarios that encourage passing under pressure, decision-making, and defensive strategies.



## 5. Skill Execution

Translating isolated skills into the chaos of a game can be challenging. Players may struggle to execute specific skills, such as passing or tackling, when under pressure or in a dynamic game situation. Design games and activities that closely mimic the situations players will encounter in an actual game. This helps in transferring the acquired skills directly to the game environment.

Games force players to make decisions on the fly, enhancing their cognitive skills during gameplay. Prioritize decision-making, and give bonus points for quick thinking. Rugby is a sport that requires quick and effective decision-making under pressure.

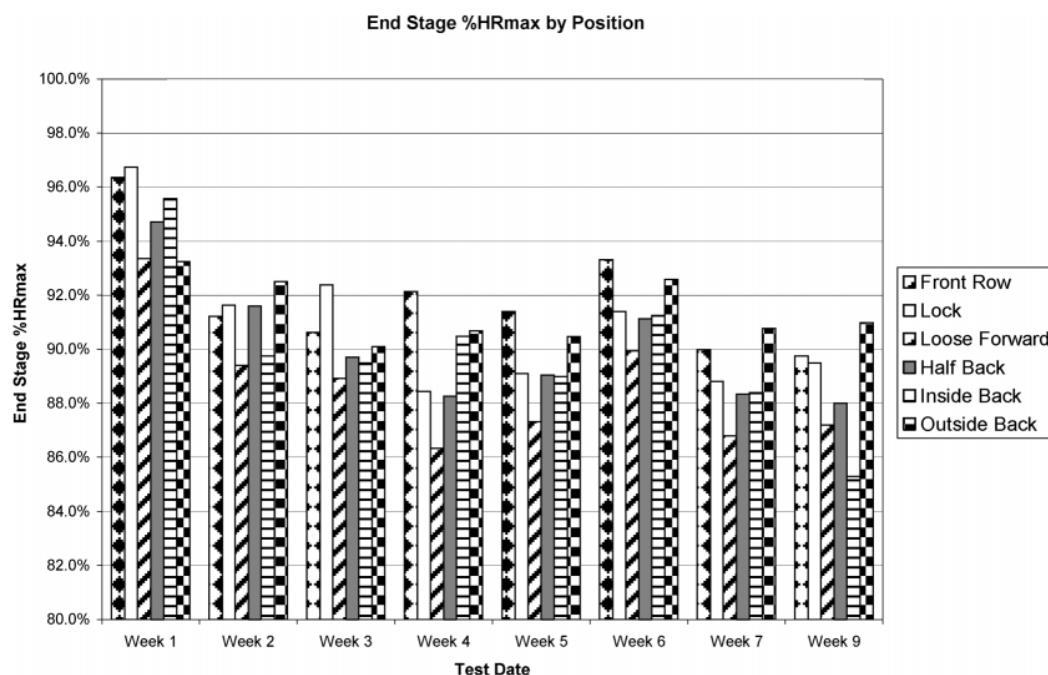
## 6. Fitness and Conditioning

Certain fitness components, like strength, speed, and agility, may require focused drills and exercises that are not naturally embedded in-game scenarios. A well-timed training session incorporating games, should not be a barrier to fitness, but rather enhance it.

Obviously, in a performance environment, player trackers are extensively used, but for a community coach, this isn't always an option. You can ask a player to wear their fitness watch or have an injured player monitor a player's work rate etc from the sidelines.

Consider shortening the time of your games, but increasing the intensity.

A 2004 study by Paul Gamble (Auckland Uni of Tech) found a significant increase in cardiorespiratory endurance markers after a 9-week pre-season training period. Metabolic conditioning was conducted exclusively in the form of skill-based conditioning games



## 7. Tactical

Players may struggle to grasp and implement complex tactical strategies within the context of a game. Understanding the nuances of positioning, game plans, and strategic decision-making may require additional instruction and targeted drills or small-sided games.

Tactical awareness is one of the biggest parts of the game where you will need to mix up the games to achieve what you need to, according to your training plan.

We explore some of the perceived issues below and offer some thoughts on solutions.

### **Decision-Making Under Pressure:**

Challenge: Players need to make quick and effective decisions in real-time situations.

Solution: Use small-sided games to create pressure situations and encourage players to think on their feet. Incorporate decision-making drills between the games to simulate match scenarios.

### **Awareness of space and Positioning:**

Challenge: Players must understand the importance of space and positioning on the field.

Solution: Design games that emphasize spatial awareness, such as games with modified pitch dimensions or rules that encourage players to exploit space. Consider the importance of feedback on players' positioning during and after games.

### **Communication and Teamwork:**

Challenge: Effective communication is crucial, and not just white noise. Players need to work together as a team.

Solution: Include games that require constant communication. Emphasize the importance of talking on the field.

### **Adaptability to Different Game Scenarios:**

Challenge: Players need to adapt their strategies based on the evolving dynamics of the game.

Solution: CHANGE IT, introduce chaos in training sessions by modifying game rules or conditions. This helps players develop adaptability and a range of tactical responses.

### **Risk Management:**

Challenge: Players must learn when to take risks and when to play it safe.

Solution: Your coaching philosophy is crucial here, don't say one thing and do another. If you are a risk taker, create games that reward calculated risks, but also highlight the consequences of poor decision-making.

By addressing these tactical challenges through a well-designed games-based approach, coaches can enhance players' overall rugby skills, decision-making abilities, and game understanding. Regular feedback and debriefing sessions are crucial to the learning process, allowing players to reflect on their performance and make improvements.

## 8. Individual Needs

A GBA can sometimes focus more on team dynamics, rather than the individual. It is important to consider the individual skills and game understanding as well as the team cohesion. Individual skill blocks should be regularly incorporated within your training framework.

In a performance environment, session recording and analysis, along with multiple coaches, allow a better review of individual performances at training, above and beyond what is visualised on the pitch. Players should be encouraged to seek out advice if they feel that a certain part of their game needs improving.

As a community coach, this is much more of a challenge. There are only so many things you can monitor, when you may be the only coach at training. The most under utilised resource in nearly every club, is the injured player. Encourage injured players to assist, this may be concentrating on just a couple of players, or key positions within the team.

## 9. Time Management

As with any training session, time management is key. However, a GBA session can get away from you very quickly if you let it. Balancing the need for the whole-part-whole within the constraints of a practice session can be challenging. There is a tendency to stop and start games based on mistakes and the need for perfection, this will take up big chunks of time. Rather, consider that perfection is unachievable, and a bit of chaos is good.

## 10. Injury Risks

There is a perception that there are more injuries in a GBA, but there is little data to back this up. Rather the global issue of over working players relates to injuries more than the GBA itself. If anything, the players game conditioning will be better, in a well thought out and structured training block. Training cycles should consider increased and decreased intensity levels based on player loadings.

## 11. Assessment and Feedback

This directly relates to individual needs as mentioned earlier. Coaches may find it challenging to assess individual player performance in the midst of a game. Providing timely and specific feedback to players becomes crucial for their development. Clarity and specificity are key.

## Conclusion

Whilst there are many challenges faced by coaches in a Game-Based-Approach, the benefits far outweigh them. With planning, these sessions provide real simulations of rugby and its components plus provide the cardiorespiratory endurance.

It is imperative that coaches consider the outcome they are trying to achieve, before planning what games to utilise. The “play with purpose” is key, and should be at the heart of all your training.

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National Community Coaching Panel (NCCP)

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- CHANGE IT