

The impact of modern lifestyles on rugby players and issues for how we coach.

1. Introduction

Like all sports, Rugby is a game that has evolved over time into the game we see played today and this evolution will continue as rules change, players develop differently, coaches change strategy and society throws up an ever changing landscape within which our sport competes for money, players, spectators and television deals.

This paper looks at the players of tomorrow, who right now are competing for their school and club in one or many sports. They are part of 'Generation Y' and live in a society that is driven by technology. *"They grew up with mobile phones, the internet, pay TV"* (Bryan Patterson 2007) and an iPod stuck in their ear. Their daily physical activity is comprised of organised sport and training sessions including visits to the gym. They are visual learners (particularly boys) and like to be doing, not watching or listening. They talk the way they text and are more inclined to read dot points than sentences and paragraphs.

So, what does this mean to a rugby coach?

There are two aspects of coaching that are relevant here

- 1) Knowing our players – how they think, feel, learn, spend their time, communicate and respond to pressure is a big advantage for a coach and requires us to look at the environmental impacts of a modern society.
- 2) Each generation of players have different strengths and weaknesses to those who played a decade before which can be linked to the society they are living in. This in turn presents coaches with a different group of players over time possessing particular skills and deficiencies which need their attention.

2. Characteristics of young players in a modern environment

If we were to compare the lifestyle of those aged 15-25 (Generation Y) years today and people of the same age ten years ago, we would find two very different worlds. Go back thirty years (Generation X) and the two worlds' bare little resemblance.

Young players are both advantaged and disadvantaged by today's lifestyle

ADVANTAGES

1. **Greater awareness of healthy lifestyle**
 - Those who play sport are generally fitter as they train for **fitness that is quite often specific to rugby**
2. **Stronger and faster**
 - Greater awareness of **strength programs** and the benefits gained (eg strength, power, speed)
 - Correct training for age and physical development
 - Focus on foot speed and **core stability** in particular
3. **Questioning**
 - Young people ask more questions these days of coaches and other authority figures which challenges coaches but also **clarifies understanding**. They are *"smart-talking, brash and sometimes seem to suffer from an overdose of self esteem"* (Bryan Patterson 2007)
4. **Professionalism has created a more committed approach from players**
 - A lot of young players want to make it as professional players which has increased their **motivation** to train and work hard
 - The spin off is that their **training ethic** rubs off on others in their team or squad

DISADVANTAGES

1. **Computers and technology**
 - Young people spend a lot more time sitting down looking at a one dimensional screen which narrows their **vision**
 - iPod's and SMS in their day mean young people spend **less time communicating – talking**. *"three-quarters of all SMS messages are sent by Gen Ys"* (Bryan Patterson 2007)
2. **Not playing in the park**
 - Less games of touch and tackle are played in the park where kids can **experiment** and play around with ideas

- Less time spent playing games in the park and in large spaces means kids are **not developing spacial awareness** – particularly in city area

"An analysis of the birthplace of 2,240 professional athletes in basketball, baseball, ice hockey, and golf, showed a birthplace bias toward smaller cities, with professional athletes being overrepresented in cities of less than 500,000 and underrepresented in cities of 500,000 and more" (Côté, MacDonald, Baker, and Abernethy -in press)

- **peripheral vision** is not exercised for the same reason
- **Kicking skills** are not as practiced
- **Physical competencies** are not as practiced

3. Creative play

- There is a danger in a very commercial world that
 - imaginary play is replaced by play where **no imagination** is required
 - creative play is replaced by **non creative play**
 - unstructured replaced by **structured**

"Specifically, athletes from large urban centers are more likely to practice their sport in a structured setting such as a league, which is monitored by coaches with specific practice times and games (Kristjansdottir & Vilhjalmsson, 2001).

"Such organized sport programs require a high level of human resources such as parental involvement, adult supervision, and coaching, which may limit the time children spend playing sports"(Jessica Fraser-Thomas and Jean Côté)

- spontaneous replaced by **organised**

- We should train players to **play**, not simply execute skills in a closed environment and expect transfer into a game situation

"While there is some sport research that supports a positive relationship between deliberate practice training and elite performance (e.g. Helsen, Starkes, & Hodges, 1998; Hodge & Deakin, 1998; Hodges & Starkes, 1996; Starkes, Deakin, Allard, Hodges, & Hayes, 1996), several dimensions of the theory of deliberate practice have not been supported (see Abernethy, Farrow, & Berry, 2003 for a review). For example, few studies have shown that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice is indeed a prerequisite for expert performance in sport. To the contrary, expert performance in sports where peak performance generally occurs after the age of 20 has been achieved with 3,000 to 4,000 hours of sport specific training (i.e. deliberate practice; Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, in press). Further, Baker and Côté (2006) advocate that reducing the acquisition of expert performance in sport to deliberate practice fails to acknowledge important developmental, motivational, and psychosocial aspects"

4. Obesity

- Obesity is a product of diet and the loss of play time in the park, yard or street in favour of time indoors, often at the computer.

"Despite high youth sport participation rates, child obesity is at an all time high in many developed nations" (Tremblay, Katzmarzyk, & Willms, 2002).

5. Loss of 'game sense'

- Primary schools have reacted to the loss of game sense by introducing **invasion games**
- Too many coaches rely largely on **closed drills** that they pick up at coaching courses without transfer into games

"A recent study by Côté, MacDonald, Baker, and Abernethy (in press) provides strong support for a sport environment that includes sampling and playing activities instead of specialization and deliberate practice"

6. Learning styles are more catered for meaning that coaches too, need to cater for these

- **Old school coaching** is lost on young players who get bored very quickly
- Sessions should aim to be dynamic, relevant, challenging, enjoyable, timed, measured against objectives

7. Winning v player development

- Coaches **worried about winning** which is a reflection of societies attitudes and the money involved in sport, rather than focussing on skill development
- **Trial and error** has gone out of coaching
- Too many **structured training sessions**

"From a psychosocial perspective, youth often feel excessive pressure to win, perceive themselves as having poor abilities, feel unattached to their teams, and feel vulnerable in the presence of teammates" (Wankel & Mummery, 1990)

"Many researchers have argued that if children are exposed to competition and advanced skill work too soon, they will experience a decreased sense of self-esteem and competence, and an increased sense of anxiety. (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen's, 1997)

8. Impatient

- Instant gratification is a characteristic of the young generation of players we are seeing in schools, clubs and even elite level rugby these days. Coaches need to understand that the market for players is competitive and if players are not motivated by what they are doing at training, they will not only change clubs, they will change codes.

"if there's a generalisation to be made about young Generation Y people, it's that they don't like waiting...the only problem might be their impatience with the old way" (Bryan Patterson 2007)

"Too many people, they have low attention spans and high expectations. If Gen Ys are not happy, they will just look for another job" (Bryan Patterson 2007)

3. Who are the next generation of players

The players that fill our schoolboy, colts and premier grade sides are the product of a modern society and a lifestyle that is very different to anything before it. Considering the observations above there are some real strengths we can identify in the modern player and some obvious weaknesses.

STRENGTHS

Young players are stronger than ever before and very aware of what is and isn't good for their bodies. They have a gym culture where strength, size and body shape are important and they are well educated by their schools and clubs on health and nutrition. They are confident, indeed sometimes over confident and will speak up if unsure about something or they disagree with the coach or another player.

They like to watch game DVD's and evaluate their performance and they are well drilled in the skills that their coach focuses on.

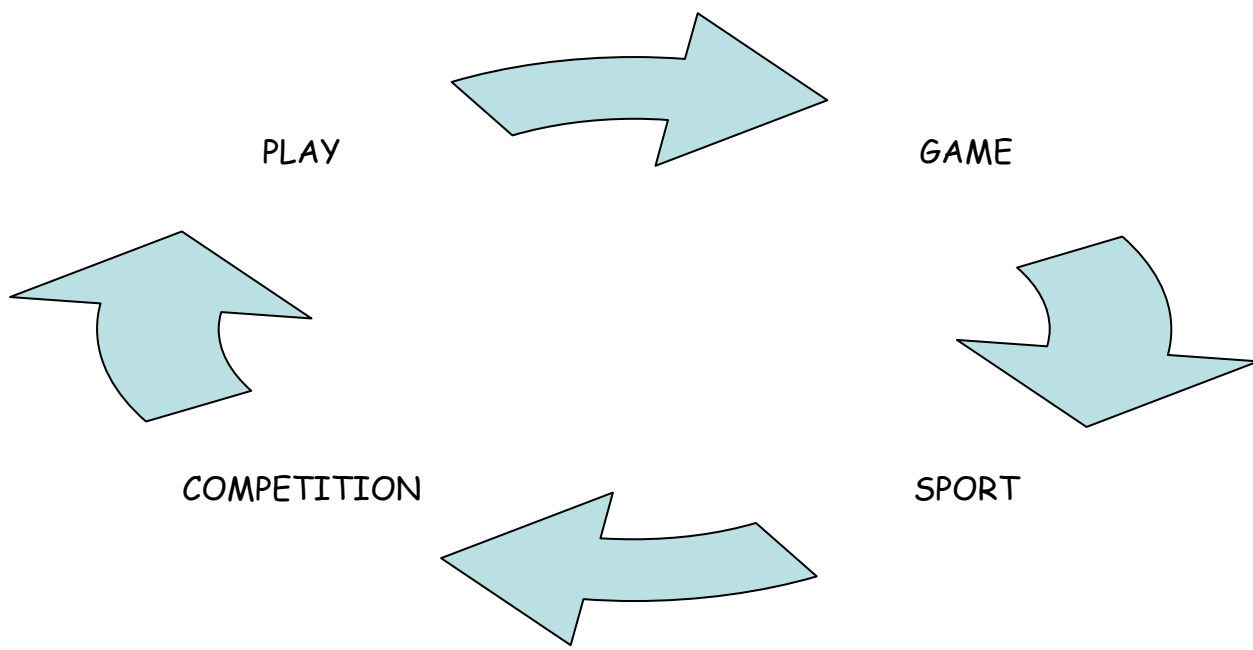
WEAKNESSES

All the research into modern lifestyle suggests that young people do not engage in 'play' time as much as previous generations.

"The decline of children's free, self-initiated play is the result of major technological innovation, rapid social change and globalization. Computers and televisions have become all pervasive within our homes, safety factors are a concern for parents and children have gravitated indoors as a result instead of playing in the local park or reserve. Children are now spending more time in an orchestrated world of adult-led and organized activities than any earlier generation. Often children have every afternoon of the weekend planned for them as well as weekend sporting commitments. This allows little time for the child to engage in free play where their thoughts are their own, where they can create imaginary worlds and solve problems and disagreements without the assistance of adults" (Judith Nash 2008)

The 'continuum of physical activity' (Fig 1) has young people spending more time in organised sport and competition, at the expense of play and games.

Figure 1 – Continuum of physical activity



This means that young people spend less time experimenting in a play environment without any focus on winning/losing and the end result. This is partly due to the 3-4 hours of time spent watching TV and on the internet. Furthermore, any attempts made by schools' and parents' to encourage more physical is often in the form of structured and organised sport (not play) where winning becomes a focus and there are often rules to follow. This lack of play leads to a lack of experiential skill development.

The hours of play time on Tasman Street in La Perouse that produced the Ella brothers, have been replaced by hours in front of a screen and participating in organised sport. This is worse in city areas where there are less open spaces available and children are not allowed by their parents to go and play in the parks unless supervised.

Worth mentioning too, is the career path that players and parents are often focussed on when a player shows ability at a young age. Suddenly, kids are playing to be noticed, not for fun.

The other casualty in this is the lack of 'game sense'. An inherent outcome of any physical activity is that it teaches spatial awareness, vision and decision making. However, the lack of free play is impeding the development of these skills. This is where the skills to "play what's in front" are first learnt and developed.

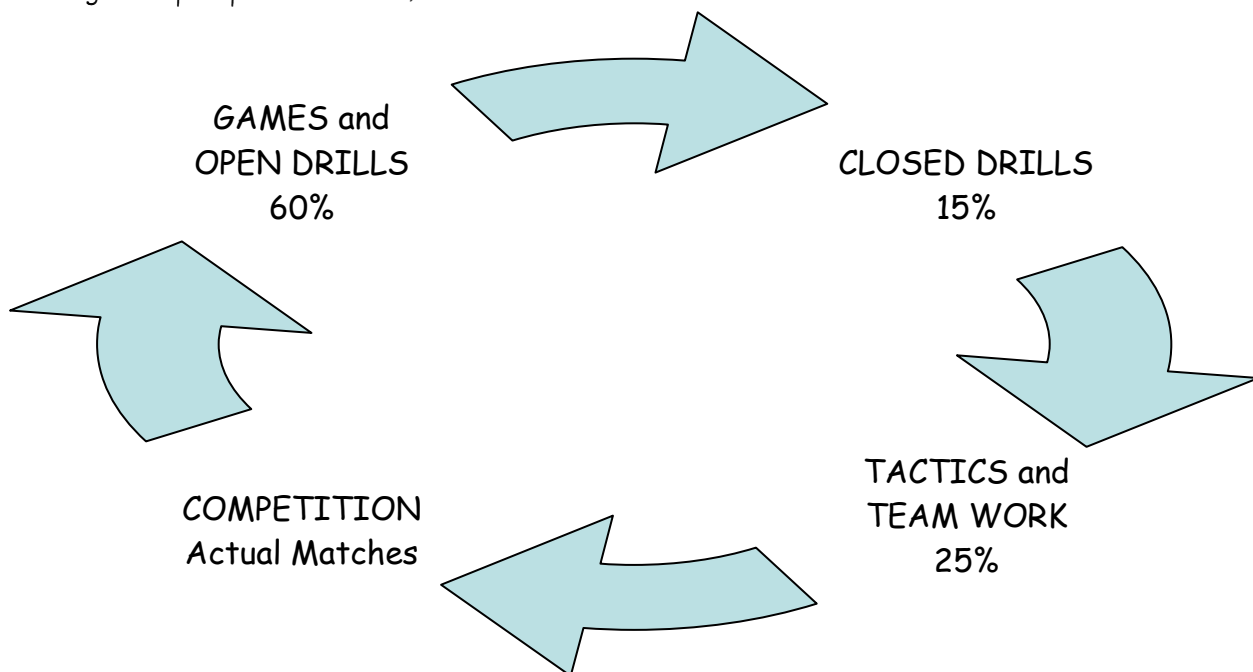
Furthermore, the focus on 'closed drills' at training in the last 10-15 years has also impaired the development of vision, spatial awareness and decision making. When the outcome is planned, players stop looking for the unexpected and indeed, struggle to execute the same drill when done in an 'open drill' environment. It would appear that learning skill technique in a closed environment is not as helpful on game day as learning the same technique in an open environment. There is a place for closed drills but, they should form a small part of your training sessions.

4. Issues for how we coach?

- **Training needs to challenge athletes to make decisions.** Every time we do a closed drill, there is little to no decision making. This is the very thing that we need to challenge the next crop of players with, as their junior development has lacked games and decision making. This type of training is also more motivating for players.
"Athletes rated practice activities that are high in concentration and effort as also being high in enjoyment" (Jean Côté Long-Term Athlete Development, Associated Coaching Pathways, and Implications for Coach Education, 2008)
- **Rugby coaches who discourage their athletes from trying other sports at a young age may be disadvantaging them.** At a young age in particular, athletes need not specialize in one sport but rather, gain from participating in a range of sports. This helps develop a range of skills along with developing the athletes ability to adapt to new sports and new skills later on. *"First, sport programmers must be careful not to focus too heavily on early specialization, as young athletes are often not physically, psychologically, socially, or cognitively ready for all that early sport specialization entails. Involvement in a diversity of activities and play during childhood appear to lead to physical competence and enjoyment (Côté & Hay, 2002; Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Kirk, 2005), which leads to continued motivation for sport participation. Sport organizations may soon need to restrict hours of training based on age, to facilitate children's overall healthy development (Weirsmas, 2000).*
- **A coach should allocate 60-80% of training time to games and open decision making drills.** Young players coming through lack the game sense and decision making skills that previous generations had and therefore training sessions must be geared to make up for that deficit.
- **Coaches should observe and therefore assess their players skill level via games and use closed drills and open drills later on to correct poor technique.** This is contrary to the idea of starting with closed drills and building them into a game to finish. Skills executed in a closed environment do not necessarily transfer into a game scenario. Coaches are better off testing players skill execution in games and therefore see a players real ability to execute under pressure.
- **Don't over coach through skill technician, at the expense of tactics and game like skill execution.** A players skill execution may not be perfect, but the end result is very effective, therefore we may be trying to change something that may not necessarily need changing. 'If it aint broke, don't fix it'.

- **Players should be encouraged to play matches whenever they can.** This may expose them to risk of injury however, rapping players in cotton wool to preserve them for your game does nothing to practice their technical and tactical skills under the pressures of a real game
- **Games are more fun.** Players will keep playing rugby if they enjoy it and they are challenged. Game based training has an element of competitiveness that athletes enjoy in training without emphasis on the result. Games are motivating and challenge a players decision making
- **Mix it up.** Training must be dynamic for the modern day player otherwise they will get bored very quickly....remember the Y Generation are impatient. The best sessions are the ones that change focus every 15-25 minutes. That doesn't mean you have to start something new...just change the focus, the rules, the numbers involved, throw in a weighted ball, wet the ball, play with eggs, mix teams, introduce rewards/penalties, anything to keep things moving along.
- **Coaches should constantly evaluate where the majority of their training time is focused.** It is suggested that coaches consider the following model

Figure 2 - Suggested continuum of TRAINING for RUGBY players aged 15-20yrs. (% refer to the percentage of training time spent per week on each)



5. Conclusion

The intention of this paper has been three fold

- to recognise what we already know about the importance of 'game sense' in our training and the deficiencies of closed drills and the associated skill set of players who have come through that style of training in the last ten years
- to analyse the deficiencies in our young players and suggest environmental reasons for these
- to give coaches some suggestions on how we can address these deficiencies in both the current crop of players and those of tomorrow, all of whom are part of the Y Generation.

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