

Coaching and Learning in a Digital World

Introduction

Rugby Union is a complex and dynamic sport that requires a combination of skill, fitness, mental toughness, and teamwork (Rugby AU, 2024). Coaching rugby players, whether at the grassroots, amateur, or elite level demands more than just a sound understanding of the game. Effective coaching involves understanding the diverse needs of players, motivating them, and fostering an environment that promotes both individual and collective growth where the coach acts as a guide or mentor (O'Donnell, et al., 2016, p. 122). This responsibility extends beyond technical and tactical guidance, as coaches also play a pivotal role in shaping players' mental and emotional resilience, building trust, and instilling a strong work ethic within the team (Boardley et al., 2008, p. 275). The evolving nature of sport, combined with its diverse range of skill sets, requires coaches to continuously adapt to emerging trends and incorporate new methodologies in their approaches. (Gilbert, 2018, P. 26). This assignment will explore how to coach rugby union players in today's environment, with a focus on the impact of the digital age, coaching strategies and how to get the best out of players at different levels. The development of innovative coaching tools and the integration of cutting-edge technology, such as performance analysis software and virtual coaching platforms, has transformed how coaches approach training and match preparation. Tools like HUML (2025) and Sportscode (2025), which provide detailed video analysis and performance metrics, are now integral in the modern coaching toolkit. HUML's ability to breakdown video footage and offer insights into individual and team performance helps coaching make data-driven decisions, while Sportscode offers detailed tagging systems for specific aspects of play, allowing for precise feedback and targeted development. Moreover, understanding how to balance traditional coaching methods with the latest advancements in sports science and video analysis is essential to maximising player potential. The aim is to provide insights into how modern coaching practices, the integration of technology like HUML and Sportscode, and data analysis can optimise player and team performance, while further enhancing coach effectiveness in rugby union. In doing so, this analysis will offer a comprehensive understanding of how rugby coaches can best navigate this balance between technology and traditional methods to drive success.

The Role of Technology in Player Development

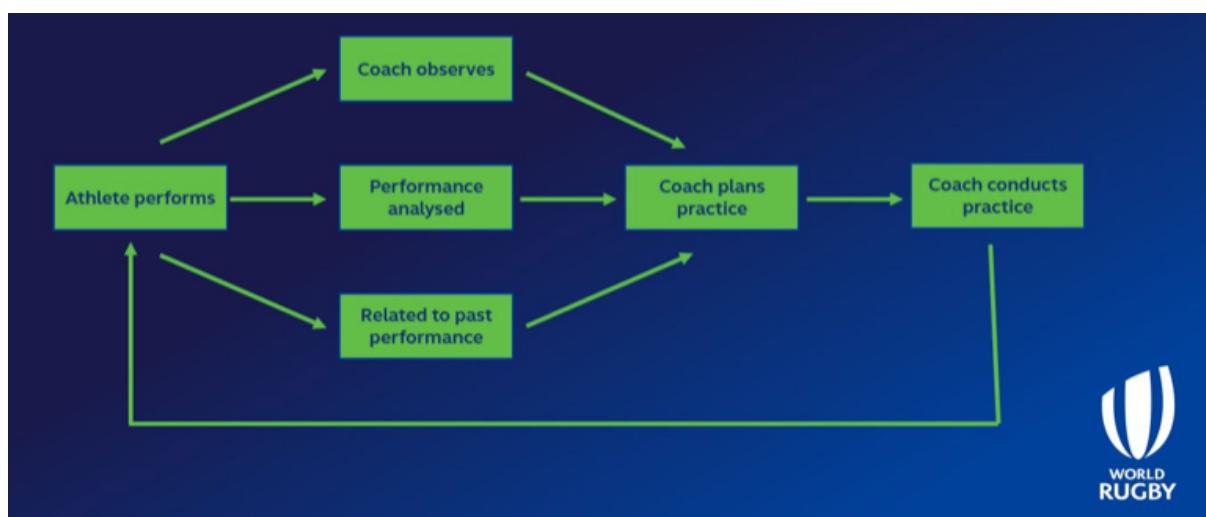
Navigating the 21st Century digital world can be a daunting prospect for adults above the age of 40. The digital age where modems beeped when accessing the internet and social networking meant riding your bike to a friend's house are beyond the comprehension of Gen Y. Expectations of evolving into technically and digitally savvy individuals are an essential part of becoming an informed citizen. This can be viewed through the same lens within a sports coaching context, as coaching trends change and coaching continuums develop, so too, does the expectation to become informed coaches (Informed Practitioner in Sport, 2020).

The emergence of the digital age has significantly influenced how rugby players train, learn, and engage with the game. From fitness trackers and performance analysis software to the growing influence of social media, modern players are increasingly exposed to technological advancements that shape their development (Flintoff et al, 2014, p. 1). One of the most notable changes in rugby coaching has been the increased use of technology. Video analysis tools such as *Hudl* and *Sportscode* have become essential for reviewing match footage and individual player performance. These tools enable coaches to become digital curators where complex game situations are broken down and specific feedback is provided to players and support coaches, which can improve both tactical awareness and technical skill (Reside, 2011). Through measured analysis players can identify areas where they excel and areas requiring refinement, allowing coaches to support athletes through scaffolded assistance from observational feedback during training sessions or more purposeful feedback through one-on-one interactions with the creation of individualised development plans (IDP) enabling a more targeted and effective training regime to extend an athletes zone of proximal development (Duchesne et al, 2019, p. 103). This has seen coaching move from a 'one-size fits all' perspective and coaches inevitably need to use various techniques to support and develop themselves and the athletes they coach. Furthermore, consideration for theorists ideations such as the Piagetian and Vygotskian perspectives on cognitive development offer important contributions to the practice of coaching (O'Donnell et al., 2016, p. 123). For example, observing game play or practice and providing and receiving appropriate feedback to create developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

Effective extrinsic feedback can be used to complement the intrinsic feedback of the performance and accelerate the learning process. It is therefore important to create

performance evaluation systems to collect this information consistently and objectively removing bias from a performance. Performance analysis plays a crucial part in designing and working with these evaluation systems that assist coaches and teams in improving performance (World Rugby Passport [WRP], n.d.). Figure 1 provides World Rugby's process for performance analysis which aligns with the intrinsic feedback coaches observe during performance and the steps which can be taken for extrinsic feedback to develop and implement training programs to enhance an athlete's performance.

Figure 1. Analysis process.



Adapted from: Franks et al., 1983. Analysis of performance: Qualitative or quantitative, *Science Periodical on Research and Technology in Sport*, March, GY-1.

Another technological advancement is the use of fitness tracking devices, such as GPS units and heart rate monitors, which help coaches assess players' physical output during training and matches. These devices provide real-time data on player movement, distance covered, and overall intensity, allowing for data-driven decisions in terms of conditioning, recovery, and injury prevention. Understanding a player's physical capabilities can also help to tailor individual training programs that maximise potential while reducing the risk of overtraining or injury (Cunniffe et al., 2009, p. 1202).

The advent of the digital world has significantly transformed the way sports are played, viewed, and analysed. Rugby, like many other sports, has witnessed a shift in how players access training resources, analyse performance, and engage with their teams and coaches. New age players are often digital natives, growing up with

smartphones, social media, and access to an abundance of online content (Australian Sports Commission, 2017), this presents both challenges and opportunities for coaches. One of the key opportunities is the access to vast amounts of information that can enhance player development. Players can watch videos of their performances, review match footage, and gain insights from professional rugby players and coaches through online platforms. Digital tools such as video analysis software and apps have made it easier for coaches to break down key moments from games, analyse individual player performances, and tailor training sessions to address specific areas of weakness. This allows coaches to deliver more personalized feedback, making coaching more data-driven and objective. However, there are challenges that come with this new era of digital engagement. The proliferation of online content, especially on social media, can lead to information overload. Players might receive conflicting advice or be influenced by trends that may not align with their coach's philosophy or the team's tactics. Furthermore, the temptation of instant gratification, whether it's through social media engagement or seeking shortcuts to improvement can undermine the work ethic and discipline required in rugby. As a coach, juggling work, life, and coaching expectations along with the challenging era of digital engagement can be daunting. Additionally, it is important to guide players in discerning quality information from noise, and to ensure that they maintain a balanced approach to their development both on and off the field. Having a sound understanding of digital knowledge is key to unlocking Gen Y athletes and 'speaking their language can go a long way to a better coach-athlete relationship.

The digital world also affects how coaches communicate with players. Many players now expect immediate feedback and are accustomed to quick, direct communication via digital platforms. This can be beneficial in maintaining strong player-coach relationships, enabling coaches to provide real-time guidance, support, and motivation regardless of the location. This instant access to feedback can enhance an athlete's understanding of their development and progress. However, the reliance on digital communication also risks reducing face-to-face interactions that are essential for building trust, rapport and emotional connection. Whilst technology can make coaching more efficient, it should not replace the personal interactions from in-person meetings, which non-verbal cues and body language can be interpreted, and deeper connections can be built. For example, one-on-one conversation after practice, where both encouragement and feedback is provided whilst listening to an athlete's concerns, is difficult to replicate via text message. To make the most of digital tools while preserving

the human aspect of coaching, coaches must find a balance between technological support and personal engagement. Coaches can develop a comprehensive system that supports their players' physical, emotional, and mental development. The key is not to rely solely on one method of communication but to blend both approaches thoughtfully, using technology as an enhancer rather than the replacement for human connection is the foundation of coaching.

Conclusion

Coaching rugby union players in the modern age requires a multifaceted approach that combines technical expertise with a deep understanding of players' psychological and emotional needs. With the increasing influence of technology and the digital world, coaches must be able to utilize tools for performance analysis and player development while also guiding players through the pressures of modern sports culture. For younger players, the focus should be on developing technical foundations, fostering teamwork, and nurturing positive values like resilience and leadership. At all levels, getting the best out of players involves understanding their individual needs, motivating them appropriately, and creating an environment that supports their physical and mental well-being. Ultimately, great coaching is about more than just improving a player's rugby skills, it's about helping them become better athletes, stronger individuals, and valued team members. By balancing the demands of modern rugby with a personalized, player-centric approach, coaches can unlock the full potential of their players and foster a culture of growth, achievement, and success in rugby union.

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