

JUNIOR DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS



DO WE OVER COACH OUR FUTURE TALENT IN RUGBY?

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INTRODUCTION

I am still learning the art of coaching rugby but through my study and research of our great game I wonder if development coaching is becoming too textbook and the big question, **DO WE OVER COACH OUR FUTURE TALENT IN RUGBY UNION?**

In my experience I have been heavily involved with coaching high-performance academies with teenagers from age's 15 – 21 years of age. Through my observations and experiences, I regularly find coaches over coaching the game of rugby to a team structure or coaching to a text book style of rugby that they got from their last coaching course or online video.

I feel very fortunate that I have a couple of coaching mentors who have taught me it is ok to be different and innovative with my coaching. Not everything you try always works but why don't we encourage our coaches its ok to try different things. A few programs I have been involved in have really pushed certain types of ways to play rugby with no real vision outside their own thought's. **DO WE REALLY WANT EVERYONE DOING THE SAME THING IN RUGBY?**

From my experiences, I have seen some coaching techniques used in coaching our future development players that I must admit does frustrate me and I just wonder is it really helping our game and more importantly our future talent?

**Thinking
is good.
Over-thinking
can end
things before
they ever get
the chance
to develop.**

I have seen coaches and programs give U16 – U20 players a massive play book that they need to learn for a short representative program. I have seen play books that are given to kids of this age group that consist of 50 plus moves or plays and some of these representative teams only play 1 – 3 games. WHAT IS THE POINT OF THAT?

When is the last time you seen, a team perform that many moves or plays in a game and having all players knowing what their individual roles are in those plays? (I know if I had been given a play book at that age I would have been confused and more than likely not even read it)

I have tried very hard to create a generic style to my coaching of rugby that is designed for the cattle (Players) I have available in my squads. I also try to get the players involved in the way they play as if they enjoy the style of rugby they play I find them to buy into it more as a team. My squads work very hard on the 1% plays of rugby and keeping it simple. However, some of the basic concepts I always have in all my programs are:-

- 1- Possession - treat the ball with respect and only give the ball to opposition on your terms.
- 2- Play North to South, if we are playing East to West we are doing wrong.
- 3- Working harder off the field then opposition to be fitter, skilled, better educated and more prepared.
- 4- Attack in Defence – Don't wait to have the ball to attack your opposition, get up hard, tackle harder and smarter to get turn overs and put pressure on oppositions attack (make them make the mistakes). Teams will always be able to score points, I am more interested in stopping them.

RESTRICTING NATURAL TALENT

This would have to be one of my biggest pet hates. I constantly see talented players being told they can't do something because it is not what the coach wants. This again comes into my concern of are we over coaching our future talent. I see talented kids criticized because they try something different that may sometimes not align with the coaches' game plan. This in turn frustrates the player and more importantly you don't get all the skills he can bring to the team. Why have a talented player in your squad if you don't give him the support to have a go and back his talent?

- I may be incorrect in this but when coaching in development programs I try to make the players smarter rugby players by putting them in game scenarios at training and getting them to think for themselves. (Isn't this what we need them to do in a real game?) The other thing I always do is encourage them in having a go and let my players know that they will never be criticized by me or my coaching staff if they have a go at an opportunity they see, **EVEN WHEN IT FAILS**. Kids need to learn it is ok to sometimes fail trying things but learn from your mistakes. Then get better/smarter and more confident the next time they try it.

IF YOU'RE A DEVELOPMENT COACH THEN DEVELOP PLAYERS

Put quite simply if you are a coach in a development coaching position it is not about you as a coach it is about you developing future rugby players to reach their full potential. I see some coaches in development programs that are only concerned about winning. I love winning as much as any other coach, but I feel after every season or program you should look at your squad and ask yourself are the players in your squad better rugby players from when you first got them?

- The number of kids I see come into high performance development programs that have poor basic skills is a worrying sign and it's all because they are not getting better coaching in juniors. Some junior coaches only coach structure to help win games and this does nothing to help develop the player's individual skills. We need junior coaches and development coaches working on the fundamentals of our game catch, pass, tackle etc.
- In saying this I feel it is also it is not always the junior coach's fault and feel a lack of coaching education is a major problem. From my experience, most coaches start out as Dad's or family members putting their hand up to coach because no one else is available. This is where clubs need to take more responsibility with the support from state organizations. Improving coach development by having better junior and development coaches it will ultimately make your club/organization stronger in the long term.

ASK FOR HELP

I have had the privilege of working with some of the best coaches in the game, but I have never meet a coach that knows everything about rugby. I think some coaches struggle to admit this and don't work hard enough on their weaknesses, we as coaches need to be-able to look ourselves in the mirror and look for ways to always improve our coaching methods. If we are not willing to change and in improve as coaches, how can we ask our players to change and develop as players?

- When I have been placed as a head coach in development programs or club teams, I think it is always important to have good communication with your coaching staff and trust in their abilities. Don't try and do everything yourself and be-able to delegate tasks/jobs to other coaching staff. If you have good communication and all the staff are speaking the same language you should be able to achieve what you want as a head coach. So ask for help of your assistant coaching staff, if not why have them?

“A coach is someone who tells you what you don't want to hear, and has you see what you don't want to see, so that you can be what you've always known what you can be”

NFL Coach – Tom Landry

SUMMARY

I see far too often development programs in clubs and junior representative programs measured on winning over the development of the players.

So should winning out way player development in our junior programs, I don't believe it should. I believe if you want to be a career coach that is fine but do it in senior rugby, if you want to be a junior (Development) coach your focus must be 100% on the players and their development and education.

How do we do this? I have given a few ideas in my report above however I feel honesty is the main ingredient needed in any development program and especially in high performance academies. Unfortunately, I have seen first-hand some poor examples of this in junior development programs and as a result they are not successful. We need to teach our growing men and women through strong leadership and being good role models. So being honest and open is a must for successful programs.

When coaching in development programs I believe you need a good amount of empathy but ensuring that honesty and accountable interactions with all stakeholders is the key to running successful development programs.

With stronger focus on our junior player development we will help improve the future of rugby in Australian Rugby.