The Guide to Coaching

Junior Rugby Players

Dan Cottrell
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Starting with a New Team

Taking on a team for the first time, setting up a new team or even sometimes simply starting a new season can be a difficult challenge even for an experienced coach, says Dan Cottrell.

Reviewing Other Sports
We are immersed in rugby union at Better Rugby Coaching, but we also study other ball handling sports, such as rugby league and American football, as well contact sports like wrestling and judo, for inspiration and new techniques.

Here we look at some of the experiences of Terry Venables, who applied a variety of techniques to achieve success time after time with a selection of top flight soccer teams. This included periods as the England national team manager and coach of Barcelona, two of the highest profile and most pressurised sports coaching jobs in the world.

Know Where You’re Going to Start
Don’t get too tied down in goal setting. It is more important to establish the basics of the team, like a strong defence, and then build on that piece by piece.

All great managers and coaches have had humble beginnings and have shaped their reputations over many years. “It’s one step at a time management. It’s not a magic wand”, says Venables.

Build from the Back
Any team has to get solid in defence and then perhaps start to work on more attacking play. You’ve got to make sure that you stop the penalties and tries.

Get to Know Your Players
Venables had the advantage of knowing a lot about many of his players before his first coaching session – they also knew him. Most new coaches don’t have this luxury.

Don’t be afraid to use big sticky labels with names, nicknames or initials in your first session. Names are a powerful tool in organising a session and developing a good working relationship with the players. Calling someone by their name means they are more likely to listen.

Get to Know the Traditions
What’s important and what’s not so crucial? Ask other coaches, the players and supporters to establish which traditions have the most importance. Avoid stepping on toes unnecessarily, but if it is time for a change, make it tactfully and appropriately.

Take Risks, but Gradually
“I’m always prepared to take risks, but prefer to take risks 12 feet from the ground as opposed to 50 feet.” The gradual approach to change is crucial, not doing something “so different the players can’t cope”.

Venables’s approach is to “start steady” and then “risk a little more if you are successful”.

Making Tough Decisions
Venables probably made his bravest decision within months of moving to Barcelona. He sold Maradona, arguably the world’s best and most famous player at the time, for £5 million (about US$10 million).

In return he brought in Steve Archibald (little known beyond British shores) for £1 million (about US$2 million). Venables’ new team went on to win the Spanish League.

Don’t Talk Too Much
Look, listen and coach. There is nothing more off putting to a new team than a long speech on your coaching philosophy. Make a few key points, like who you are, what the training will involve, and the level of attainment you wish to achieve, then start coaching. Your players will soon work out your style.

“Don’t Smile Until Christmas!”
It’s an old saying – also used in teaching by the way. It’s better to start tough and lighten up as the season goes on, rather than the other way round.

Look Smart, Coach Smart
It does make a difference! You’re judged on everything, including your appearance. Tennis shoes and tailored shorts for rugby do little to impress players or supporters. Some coaches like to have a distinctive hat so they can be spotted at all times during the training session.
Think Small
Focus on achieving small changes in the players’ skills, building up over a number of weeks. In a practice situation this might mean that a core area might be revisited every week, with reiteration on the elements that improve the execution of the skill.
For instance if you are working on rucking, then the key elements might be introduced in week one, then practiced in some form every session for the next month. The whole improvement should be observed in a month’s time. Don’t do rucking one week and then come back to it in a month’s time, hoping that the skill will be adequately replicated.

Talk Less, Say More
Society quickly blames modern technology for the reduced concentration span of people today. Whether this is correct, you should spend less time talking because after sentence five, you have probably lost quite a lot of the audience.

One Voice, One Message
Many teams will be lucky enough to have more than one coach. Sometimes parents will take a proactive semi-assistant role for example. But there are inherent dangers – lots of well meaning comments can confuse the overall message. Before each practice, it is important to agree who is leading each section. Then decide who is going to talk, when and most vitally what is going to be said.

The corporate language of how a skill or strategy is to be performed must come as a constant – even if a coach does not believe in what the others are saying. As the session progresses, the lead coach can turn to other coaches for specific comment, otherwise the other coaches purely encourage or reiterate.

The “Secret”
Trying out new drills can be tortuous. Kids and coaches can often confuse themselves on how things are supposed to work out. Then if it goes wrong, confidence is lost and attempting to put things back on track can be tough.
Why not try this trick? Let the players in on a “secret” and make them part of it. For instance say something like: “This is the drill that the All Blacks use to help them improve their handling – let’s see if we can have a go. Give me your comments at the end on what we could do better.” This makes it a joint experiment and if it goes wrong then at least everyone tried.

Doing to Talking
The ratio of doing to talking should be about 5 to 1. When you stop a practice to say something, say it, repeat it and move on.

Sideline Parents
More difficult is coping with sideline parents. It is a brave coach who faces up to a parent who is telling their sibling to do something different to the team’s agreed instructions. The best strategy is to take the practice as far away from parents as possible.

Finish on Time
Ignore the desire to take the practice beyond the official finish time, even if you need to cover more material. Think of yourself as much as your players. Ninety minutes is more than enough time to achieve all you need for that session. Short and sweet is better. Leave them wanting more.

Work in the Skills Zone
Junior matches, even up to Under 14 and Under 15 level, may take place in a smaller area of a larger pitch. The most distance is often covered by the big, fast player who skirts around the defence, or even...
Through it. Most of the other players are likely to progress in shorter distances, with short passes and short kicks. Practices should reflect this.

### Sweet Reward

Small rewards make an enormous amount of difference to players. And the beauty of sweets is that a small bar of chocolate or candy can be used to encourage even the weakest player who has perhaps tried the hardest.

Cut down the distances covered in drills to match the reality for many players. Ten metres would be a good guide distance for most drills. Anything further creates a split between those who can keep up and those who are too slow. It also keeps the players working in the “skills zone”, where skills improve, rather than having players “chasing” the drill.

#### Tips for Rewards

- Have only one or two rewards for each week.
- Pass the rewards around without prejudice.
- Share the rewards around over the season (keep a record).
- Make the rewards for different things each week. For example, for the best tackler, hardest worker in drills, best piece of skill.

### Backs Coaching Forwards

No matter what level you coach at it is rare to find a coach who is a genuine expert in every facet of the game. How do these coaches get around the key details they don’t know?

#### Take your time:

You don’t need to give an answer straight away. You could say something instead like: “Let me consider that question. I think I know the answer, but I would like to make sure.”

#### Ask the players:

Through questioning you can often help the player find the answer. For instance you can ask them the reasons for asking the question and lead them to the answer.

For instance:

Q: “Coach, I can’t seem to throw the ball straight at the lineout”.

A: “What are you doing with your hands?”

#### Build on your strengths:

A little knowledge can go a long way. Start with the session you are most comfortable with and then every week build on it.

Mean while use small sided games to highlight what you have worked on. This means that players will be learning complementary skills at the same time as imbedding the technique.

So at week 2 build in a new drill to develop what you did in week 1 and so on. Consequently by the end of week 8, you should have built up a body of drills and small-sided games that really benefits your players, whilst working your own strengths.
Confidence and Commitment

Unlike many of the coaching fads that come and go, empowerment is supported by solid research. Not only from the world of education, but also from studies of rugby teams in New Zealand, for example Lynn Kidman’s study called “Developing Decision Makers”. Empowerment has been shown to increase player motivation and commitment, as well as player retention and participation even in junior clubs. It is also a great way to build self-confidence within your team, and to develop leaders and positive communication among your players.

Playing for the Team

Educational research shows that children learn best when they know why they are learning and what the outcomes should be. They also benefit from peer tutoring, as well as self and peer assessment, along with your expert input.

This means giving players “ownership” of their own training, and also involving them in decisions on and off the pitch. You’ll also be surprised how even the youngest players have some excellent ideas.

Empowerment in Practice

Here are six simple steps to empower players on the training pitch.

1. Inform
   Always tell your players what they are going to do in each practice session or activity. For example, “In this game I want you to work on pop passes and support play”.

2. Benchmark
   Give your players some criteria or benchmarks so they know when they have been successful. This allows them to self and peer assess their abilities.

3. Question
   Ask the players for their opinions on different aspects of training or games. “What do you think you / we did well? What do you think you / we need to improve on?”
   You’ll be surprised at how clued up many of your players are. They might even come up with something you hadn’t considered.

4. Involve
   Ask the players to demonstrate techniques to the group or talk through a skill they are particularly good at. This makes them feel involved. They will put descriptions in their own and their peer’s “language”, which will help the other players understand what’s going on and why the session is important.

5. Step Back
   Don’t be afraid to take a step back sometimes and let the players discuss techniques and tactics among themselves. Perhaps ask the players what they think they need to work on in training and let them get on with it. Expect to have to arbitrate at times.

6. Peer Assessments
   Encourage your players to peer assess each other. For instance, they can give a score out of ten for the passes they receive. 📊
Do Your Players Have Game Sense?
Players who have good “sense” on the pitch seem a rare commodity – and young players with good sense more so. We know that young players love to play games, yet how often do you play games in your training?
Coaches are, therefore, turning to games during training to enhance their players’ awareness.
“Game sense” is an approach to coaching where techniques and skills are developed in games and game related practices. Players are set challenges and problems to solve.
They enjoy this interaction, motivating them to work harder in training. It also asks them to think what they are doing and why.

4 Steps to Turn a Drill into a Game
The following is an example using a basic shuttle passing drill to show you how to turn a usually boring core skill drill into a game.

Step 1
Groups of four perform the skill.

What Do You Do?

- **Facilitate the session:** Let the players have the freedom to “coach” themselves. Encourage them to discuss their mistakes in an open environment.
- **Question the players:** Don’t just give them the answers. Make them think about their actions and decisions, and then explain them to the other players.
- **Adapt the games:** Keep changing the rules and aims of the games so players have to adapt to different situations.

Be patient with the system of game sense. The rewards may not be apparent immediately. From my experience across many school and club youth sides, however, it is worth the wait.
Turning Drills into Games (cont.)

Step 3
Make the practice game related by adding in defenders. In the shuttle passing example:

- Add two defenders.
- Encourage your players to find their own solutions by problems posed by playing in attack and defence.
- Ask your players questions. These questions will give you feedback on the players’ understanding of the situation and where they might need help. For example:
  “What did you do to beat the defenders?”
  “What are the defenders doing to stop you?”
  “What skills are you using to beat the defenders?”

Step 4
Play a practice game. In the example:

- Play a 4 v 4 full contact game.
- Involve all your players and both in attack and defence.
- Ensure your players perform techniques under pressure.
- Let the players have fun.

Possibly you then might never again hear your players ask during training: “When are we going to play a game?”
The One Session Workout

Ken MacEwen, National Fitness Co-ordinator for the Scottish Rugby Union, describe some ways to build your team’s fitness and improve your players’ skills at the same time.

A Combination Session
I have long held the view that in the limited time available for the coach, fitness as well as skills can be combined to produce a session that is fun, improves the players’ ability and develops their fitness. Here is an example of such a session.

The Warm Up
Skills: Agility, evasiveness, peripheral vision, communication and speed of reaction
Develop these skills through various chasing games.

The tunnel tag game
Three or four players with a ball each chase and then tag the other players using the ball. Once tagged, the players stand with their legs apart. “Free” players can release tagged players by crawling through their legs.

The binding tag game
Two players bind together and chase the rest of the group. Once tagged, the “captured” player binds on to the chasers. When a fourth player is caught, the chasers split into pairs.

You then finish with some dynamic stretching, that is exercises done on the move, such as lunges or squats.

Speed and Agility
Skills: Quick feet, handling agility and communication
You can develop these skills by using training ladders with agility poles, and contact pads in a variety of drills. For instance players run with quick steps through a ladder, receive a pass, accelerate through a slalom of poles and then drive a pad out of the way before scoring.

Your players can work on this individually or in pairs. Each player should do the drill eight times, rest for one minute, and then repeat it twice.

The Clearing Pass
Skills: Timing, acceleration, deceleration, balance and scanning
Here’s a three part drill to try.

a) The ball carrier runs forwards and puts down the ball on the ground. The support player, immediately behind, then makes a “clearing pass” (a pass from the ground).

b) The ball carrier hits a pad, goes to ground, and presents the ball. The support player makes a clearing pass.

c) Repeat drill b). This time, however, one support player drives a pad back and a second support player makes the clearing pass.

A Conditioned Game
Skills: Handling, footwork, decision making and support

The rip touch game
Players tackle using a “grab” tackle. That is, tacklers can grab the ball carrier but they can’t go for the ball or tackle the player to the ground. Players therefore need to support quickly, rip the ball out of the tackle and pass it. Play this for 3 to 5 minutes.

Contact
Skills: Contact, support and continuity

The 7 v 4 pad game
Set up four defenders with pads in a 10 metre long by 5 metre wide channel. Seven attackers have to drive up the channel and through the defensive “wall”.

A Game to Finish
Skills: Counter attacking, handling, agility and kicking

One kick touch game
The ball carrier has to kick the ball away immediately they are touched tackled by a defender. The defence then catch or retrieve the ball to counter attack. Encourage your players to play what they see in front of them and to move up quickly in defence.

The Cool-Down / Warm-Down
Use light jogging and static stretching to finish.
Tactics for the Youth Game

Most coaches of children’s teams played rugby as adults. However, youth rugby has a number of differences from adult rugby, requiring a different type of strategy. Dan Cottrell and Paul Tyler have put their heads together and come up with these suggest tactics.

The Lineout
In most countries lifting is not allowed until the players are at least 15 years old. However, you can employ the following jumping and lineout options instead:

Tall players at the front
The three tallest players in your team stand in lineout positions 1 to 3 (or 2 to 4). This bunching will give your team a better chance of winning the ball.

Use only two man lineouts
The back player stands near the 15 metre line. The front player, the target, either fakes forwards and takes a lob going backwards, or fakes backwards and takes a flat ball going forward.

The scrum half (9) can also be used to enter the line, wherever the jumper has left a gap. Another forward can easily fill the scrum half position.

Flat and hard throws
These are better than lob balls in a full lineout, particularly if you have a jumper who can time their jumps well.

Catch and maul, tap and go
The team should maul if the ball is caught and run with it if it’s tapped. This is because a 9 is unlikely to be able to clear the back of the lineout with a pass. A maul also ties in the forwards.

Kicking
Youth kicking tends to be of the “hit and hope” variety, with hasty instructions bellowed from the sideline. Even in junior games, however, a simple strategy can make kicking a viable tactical option.

Set rules for attacking kicks
For example kick for the corners from your own half, kick high balls from halfway to their 22m line, never kick in their 22m area. You might also consider only allowing certain players to make attacking kicks.

The high ball
This is a forgotten tactical weapon among junior teams. On average, and with apologies to those teams with better players, sides tend to put their weaker players on the wings. It is worth putting these players under some “high ball” pressure early on in a game. And if it works, keep doing it.

Strike Against Their Tactics
Your players need to learn to play with their heads up. This doesn’t mean looking at the opposition because you’ve told them to, but to see where the defence is, where the best tacklers are and where the spaces are to exploit.

However it’s not only in open play that your players need to play with their heads up. It’s also important that they can make tactical decisions based on how your opponents are aligned at set piece situations.

In Attack
Bunched defence
If their defensive alignment is closely bunched they are looking to push your team out wide.
Tactics for the Youth Game (cont.)

**Tactic:** Align a bit steeper in attack, with your best passers in close and some of your strong runners out wide. Move the ball wide quickly to exploit the space on the outside.

**Deep, wide out**
If the outside defenders are lying deep they might be expecting you to kick or maybe simply lack a bit of confidence.

**Tactic:** Move the ball wide quickly to attack their weakness.

**Broad defence**
If the defence are trying to cover the width of the pitch, they will be standing quite far apart.

**Tactic:** There’s an opportunity to exploit the spaces between the defenders. Attack the gaps and have support players following close behind the ball carrier.

**In Defence**

**Flat alignment**
If your opponent’s align flat there is a good chance they will not be making many passes and will be playing a narrow game plan.

**Tactic:** Get your best tacklers close to the scrum or lineout and stop their runners before they can get over the gain line.

**Deep alignment**
If your opponent’s align deep they are likely to pass the ball wide and attack out at the wings.

**Tactic:** Cover the whole width of the pitch and get your fastest players out wide to counter the threat. Remember that if you can make a tackle out wide, you will probably create a turnover opportunity.

**Split midfield**
If they split their attacking line from a midfield position they are trying to make space to use their most dangerous and probably quickest runners.

**Tactic:** Identify where their strong runners are and make sure you have them covered with your best tacklers.

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**Making a Game Plan**

You cannot buy in players to fit the way you want to play the game. Your game plan has to be determined by the relative strengths and weaknesses of your players.

Here is our step-by-step guide to building a realistic game plan to suit all your players and the team.

1. **Make a list of the strengths and weaknesses of each member of your squad.** Consider physical attributes such as speed, passing, tackling, tackle breaking and kicking. Also consider mental skills such as reading the game and determination.

2. **Make the same list for your forward and back units.** Think about scrums, lineouts and restarts for the forwards and the ability to attack space for the backs.

3. **Repeat the process for the team as a whole.** Consider the strengths and weaknesses of rucking, support play, offloading skills and communication.

4. **Rate each attribute out of 10 for players, units and the team, where 10 is excellent for the current players ability level.** Anything over 7 is a strength and anything under 5 is a weakness.

5. **Think of ways you can minimise the impact of your weaknesses and maximise the effectiveness of your strengths.** For example if the scrum is a weakness then you need to focus on getting the ball in and out quickly. If your quick wingers are a strength then it makes sense to get them as much ball as possible and in space.

6. **The process will provide you with an excellent basis for developing a simple game plan.** It also very quickly highlights the areas of the game where you need to improve.
The Question
I coach a junior rugby team and invariably struggle with the prematch talk. I suspect my players are no more than one or two instructions deep. If the pre-match is a long winded speech, it goes in one ear and out the other. Can you give me some advice on what to say and how to say it?

The Answer – “TEAM TALK”

“T” is for “Think ahead”
Plan what you are going to say to avoid rambling.

“E” is for “Everyone focused”
Make sure you have everyone’s attention before speaking. If it is a nice day, you can get your players to sit down in front of you (with you facing the sun). If it’s cold or wet, you can get them in a tight huddle around you.

“A” is for “Ask questions, particularly to individual players”
What are you going to do today? What is your role today? What is your goal today?

“M” is for “Mood”
A few well chosen words to get your players “psyched up” can be very effective. Keep it positive and don’t overdo it. Players who are too psyched up can be as ineffective as those who are not up for it.

“T” is for “Timing”
Less is more. Keep it short and relevant. All your players will probably be able to cope with is two or three direct points.
You also don’t want your players cooling down too much after their warm-up while you speak to them for, let’s say, 15 minutes. As a rule, you should be able to say what you need to in two or three minutes maximum.

“A” is for “Aims”
Set goals for your players. “Let’s see how many tackles we can make today!” “Let’s see how few passes we can drop”. Remember to keep your goals SMART (that is Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic and Time specific).

“L” is for “Limit yourself to talk about your team”
Don’t talk about the opposition. Concentrate on what you want your players have to do.

“K” is for “Karma”
Energise your players. Be positive and reinforce to them how good they can be. Remind them about recent good performances and about what they have been doing well in training recently.

Motivate Individually
Getting players to focus on their own performance is a key part of motivating them on match day. Spend more time motivating players as individuals and keep the collective team talk short and to the point, emphasising a few key collective points.

After the Game
Don’t forget to talk to your players after the match. A well-chosen comment here can pay rich dividends in terms of motivating a player in the future. Knowing that they did a particular skill well last week gives them something to both build upon and strive for this week.
Watching the Match

A big problem for coaches on match day is where to watch the game to get the best view of everything that is going on. Paul Tyler, Rugby Coach Junior joint editor, suggests there are three places to stand, each with their pros and cons.

What Do You Want to Learn?

Unless you have a team of coaches to watch the match from different places and look for different things, it can be difficult to properly assess what’s going on during a rugby game. It is, therefore, important you know what you are looking for and where the best place to see it is.

In some countries and for some levels of rugby (usually for 5 to 10 year olds) the coach is allowed onto the pitch to stand behind and direct the team. This allows the coach to give instruction to players just learning the game and to be close at hand in case of injuries. I have assumed that this rule applies.

Choosing What’s Best for You

The more aspects of the game you try to watch, the less you will see. So you need to decide to watch out for only a few key areas of play. The most active coaches behind the team on the pitch, or will run up and down the sidelines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behind the try line</td>
<td>Best place to watch the backs.</td>
<td>Play might be far away at times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>See players’ positioning and lines of running.</td>
<td>Difficult to get perspective of where on pitch play is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You can see gaps in the defence.</td>
<td>Can’t see from how deep runners are coming.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You can see if your players are “honey potting” around the ball.</td>
<td>Can’t see if defensive line is straight.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Can be hard to communicate with players.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side of the pitch</td>
<td>Can follow play up and down pitch.</td>
<td>Can’t see the lines of running.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Get closer to the action.</td>
<td>Difficult to see gaps in defence.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can see the depth of runners.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can see how straight the defensive line is and what speed it is moving up at.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Communicate with your players more easily.</td>
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<tr>
<td>On the pitch</td>
<td>Communicate with your players easily.</td>
<td>Easy to become focused on the players around ball and not see the bigger picture.</td>
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Position
ENCOURAGEMENT
BODY POSITIONS
LINES AND GAPS

Easy to become focused on the players around ball and not see the bigger picture.