

BSN RFC

BSN RFC

Coaching Foundations



Matt Roper

July 2010



The Rugby Coach – ‘Rules of the Road’

Coaching Youngsters

Matt Roper

Coaching Coordinator, British School of the Netherlands RFC

Introduction

These notes are not intended to ‘tell’ or direct you how to coach your kids to play rugby!

The intent here is to simply offer some key ‘points for reflection’ as you go about the challenging task of coaching youngsters and helping them develop their rugby skills. These notes are also intended to act as a foundation for those of you who may wish to continue developing your rugby coaching skills and pursue additional IRB/RFU coaching qualifications.

Hopefully, much of what follows will appear intuitive and readily fits into the “*common sense*” category!

Your principal role in coaching rugby with young players is to assist them to progress and improve their individual skills and team performances, whilst enabling them to have fun. An effective coach will build mutual trust and respect between himself and his young players and instil pride, confidence and unity within the team.

Assisting a young player to develop means as a coach you should:

- 1. Understand the game of rugby**
- 2. Know your team and players**
- 3. Appreciate and apply the skills of coaching**
- 4. Demonstrate positive and effective leadership**

1. Understand the Game of Rugby

- Understand the values and traditions of the game
- Know the laws of rugby
- Select the team - *and captain*
- Develop the ‘game plan’ related to the players’ abilities
- Develop team, unit and individual player skills
- Integrate training with player and game needs
- Use knowledge of the rugby environment
- Apply a full knowledge of the core skills of rugby

2. Know your Team and Players

- Make time to get to know the youngsters as players and as individuals
- Value team culture and team cohesion
- Institute a team development plan
- Help develop fellow coaches
- Have regular contact with all players
- Have an emphasis upon rugby enjoyment
- Link with captain (*especially important in the older age youth categories*)
- Develop players' skills
- Develop team strategy
- Plan positive and effective training sessions
- Set high standards of behaviour and discipline: on and off the field of play.

3. Apply the Skills of Coaching

- Communicate clearly, simply and effectively
- Understand the skills of teaching
- Understand various players' learning styles
- Help develop skills in all players – regardless of their ability

4. Demonstrate Positive & Effective Leadership

- Develop and implement a vision for the team
- Set clear goals related to the vision
- Positively influence team members, parents and supporters
- Help all players develop a sense of pride in 'self' and in their team
- Set a strong positive example in personal behaviour and conduct - on and off the field.



COACHING A SKILL – INTRODUCTION

(Reference: NZRFU Coaching Manual – 2009)

Introduction

For young players to perform well at any level of sport they must acquire a number of skills. Skill learning begins with mastery of the basic techniques and progresses to applying those skills in increasingly competitive situations.

It is one of the coach's primary responsibilities to provide the player with opportunities to learn and practice skills in a positive and constructive environment. Appropriate skill learning, especially at the younger age levels, can set the platform for future elite performance.

The "Skill/Feedback Loop" allows a range of feedback to be processed when learning or developing a skill. Every player uses feedback to assess whether or not he/she has performed correctly and, if not, how he/she should correct any errors. Therefore one of your most significant tasks as a coach is in providing accurate and meaningful feedback on individual and team performances.

Skill Execution

When a player performs a skill/activity, the body's motor (neuro) programme tells the muscular system which muscles to contract, and move in a particular manner in order to produce the desired response.

Keep in mind that any skill execution is influenced by the player's previous learned experiences, stage of growth and development, fitness level and degree of motivation.

Feedback

A player may receive two types of feedback:

1. Intrinsic (*internal*) feedback
2. Extrinsic (*external*) feedback

Intrinsic feedback is dependent on the young player's ability to 'feel' the experience using sensory perception. If a skill was performed well, the player feels a sense of 'correctness'. If the skill was not executed as intended, the young player experiences a feeling of 'error'. Therefore keep in mind that clear and accurate demonstrations of correct skills are very important.

The more experienced the player, the greater may be accuracy in sensory evaluation. The ability to perceive what is correct in the early stages of learning a skill is less accurate because the young player's memory has not been developed enough to be able to have a good perception of 'correctness'. Coaches should ask younger players specific questions about how the skill felt when executed in order to encourage them to become more self-aware.

Extrinsic feedback is given by an external source such as you, the coach, other players, or the spectators. As a coach, you need to be able to identify the errors, provide the information (feedback) appropriately and specifically, and then give instructions for the correct execution of the skill or activity.

- *Refer to the section at the end of this paper for tips on giving effective feedback.*

Evaluation

After receiving both intrinsic and extrinsic feedback the young player must be able to "sort" the information in order to evaluate his/her performance compared to the 'ideal model'.

Developing a young player's ability for self-awareness is important in providing a source of internal control rather than the player always depending on external sources (ie. you, the coach) to evaluate the performance and tell him/her what to do.

Young players may not have all the information about a game situation or training drill, so it can be difficult for them to evaluate the feedback and make the appropriate decisions. You, as the coach can assist this process by providing clear, precise feedback that is specific to the required performance and at a level the player can understand.

Evaluation of a young player's performance can also be limited by the coach's ability to give feedback (*communication*) and the player's ability to receive and process the essential information. Therefore, ensure you offer clear and focussed feedback in a manner the young player can effectively digest!.

Decision Making

If the skill execution was incorrect the young player must further process this information to decide what went wrong, and what he/she can do to correct it.

One of the major limitations to performance improvement in a young rugby player is the ability to make sound and appropriate decisions. By giving players opportunities to decide for themselves how or what to do to fix their own errors, the coach enables the players to practise and improve their decision-making processes. However, as the coach you have a responsibility for making sure that the young player is correct in their judgement and understands what improvement is needed.

SELECT AND TEACH RUGBY SKILLS

Introduction

Skill can be defined as the learned ability to bring about a pre-determined result with maximum certainty, and maximum efficiency.

Technique refers to the way in which a skill is performed - the successful movement of the body to achieve a specific activity.

A skilled performance does not depend simply on the physical ability of the player and his/her technique, it also depends on the ability to think, interpret and select. It involves the player in decision-making.

Selecting a rugby skill

When selecting a rugby skill to teach, as a coach you should consider the following:

1. What are the stages of learning, growth and development of each player?
2. What skills are important for players to learn, what are the measures of success in performing them - and to have fun and be safe!
3. What are the basic movements/elements that underlie these skills?

Ways of Teaching a Skill

Whole or part learning

A skill may be taught in its entirety (whole learning) or broken down into parts (part learning). Most coaches combine the two methods (as whole-part-whole learning) with players learning the whole skill at times, while at other times concentrating on specific parts of the skill.

The best method depends on the skill being taught. Generally, with younger players whole learning is best for simple skills and part learning for more complex skills.

Chaining

This involves breaking a skill down into progressive part teaching. Each part is taught and practised on its own and the parts are added in their correct sequence. Chaining is adopted when a skill is complex and needs to be taught in a particular order. (eg. Scrummaging).

Massed or distributed practice

Massed practice is where the coach has his players continuously practice a skill without any breaks until the skill has been learned. In a distributed practice, the players may learn or develop the skill in short, frequent practice sessions interspersed with rests or alternative skill activities.

Distributed practice is the most effective for improving performance particularly with younger players, as the breaks between sessions reduce boredom and recharge the players' energy and powers of concentration. Massed practice is more suitable for the older and more skilled age groups and/or highly motivated players.

Mental or physical

The physical practice of a skill is necessary for improved performance and is what most players are accustomed to. However, mental practice can also be used by having the player 'picture' the performance in their mind. This can also be done using mental imagery, viewing performances (live or on video), and reading or listening to instructions. Mental practice can be particularly effective with younger players who respond well to visual imagery.

A combination of both physical and mental practice makes for the most effective learning.

Explanation

This informs the young player what they are doing, how they will do it and why they are doing it.

For young players all explanations should be:

- Specific
- Given in simple language
- Short and to the point

Giving an Effective Demonstration

The purpose of a demonstration is to increase a young players' understanding of the skill by providing an accurate model from which to learn. For young players to make appropriate decisions on how to execute skills, coaches need to provide an explanation and a demonstration so that players can learn and practice. An effective skill demonstration requires careful planning by the coach. Consider the following:

Why is the skill important?

Understanding the importance of the skill in the context of a game will assist both the coach and player in teaching and learning the skill. It is also vital that the laws of rugby (relative to the skill being taught) are accurately explained when teaching or developing a skill.

How will the skill be demonstrated?

Select an appropriate method of teaching the skill, taking into account the type of skill and the experience and ability of the young players. Generally, it is recommended that the whole skill should be demonstrated first to show the youngsters what the skill would look like when performed correctly. Then the skill is broken down into various skill components (whole-part-whole).

Remember, players need to be able to observe the demonstration from different angles.

Remember to show both "left and right-handed" ways to execute the skill where appropriate.

Make a note in your session plan of 2-3 teaching points and some key words or phrases used to emphasise important parts of the skill. Keep the instructions simple and avoid the

use of jargon where possible. Younger players should be asked to concentrate on only one or two aspects of the skill at any one time.

What equipment will be required?

Coaches need to determine any equipment and/or support that will be required to give an effective demonstration and ensure that everything is available and in place when the time comes. This is particularly important with the younger age groups in order to keep their attention!

Where will the skills be demonstrated?

When planning your demonstration, take into account any possible distractions for your players such as the position of the sun or bright lights. Depending on how many players there are, decide on an appropriate formation, which enables them all to see and hear the demonstration clearly. One of the most common and effective formations is a semi-circle with the coach or demonstrator standing in front.

Where will the demonstration take place?

The most obvious time to give a demonstration is when the players are learning or developing a skill; this should take place early in the training session while the players' minds and bodies are relatively 'fresh'. Demonstrations can also be used when giving feedback, or to remind players of a previously learned skill. It can also be useful to repeat the demonstration at the end of training so players can be reminded of what to work on.

Who will demonstrate the skill?

It is important that whoever is chosen to demonstrate can perform the skill correctly. Coaches will often demonstrate skills themselves, but you can also use players or use video media.

If using players to demonstrate, remember to choose players with a range of skills. Asking the 'star' of the team to demonstrate all the time can be discouraging for the less skilled and the learners. For most young players, being chosen to demonstrate is seen as a reward for good performance. Be aware however, that some players find this embarrassing!

Ask specific questions after the demonstration has been given. Avoid simply asking "Did you understand?" as young players tend to nod a yes response whether they think they understand or not. Ask specific points about the demonstration and get the players to 'show you' what they have learned. Their responses to questions and the way they perform the skill will tell you whether they understood or not. Also keep in mind that not all your players may be native English speakers!!

If a young player has not understood the demonstration or, after a series of sessions he/she has not yet grasped the concept, then it is up to the coach to modify the information and/or the teaching method to assist the young player's understanding. Everybody learns differently and it is one of the coach's roles as a 'teacher' to find a teaching method that suits the player's learning.

PLANNING FOR A SKILL PRACTICE

The Training Environment

Consider the number of players you have, the number of other coaches able to support the activities you are planning, the amount of space available, what equipment there is and any possible safety hazards.

Adapt the activities and equipment to meet the players' developmental needs and to suit the skill practice.

Managing Time

The amount of time devoted to a skills session(s) is an issue when planning training. To reach a high level of skill ability, young players need to perform the skill thousands of times during their rugby playing life!

It is important to give young players many opportunities to practice and, where possible, minimize the time that they are not being kept busy during every training session. Establishing organisational routines for your training sessions at the beginning of the season can maximise use of time. For example, a routine for dividing into groups and for getting equipment out etc.

Other factors that increase time practising a skill include providing activities with high participation rates, decreasing instruction time (focus on the key factors) and decreasing the time it takes to move from one activity to another (transition). It goes without saying that these issues are particularly important with the younger age groups in order to maintain the kid's attention and to prevent them from becoming bored and disinterested!

Organising Groups and Formations

Organising young players into groups so there is maximum opportunity to practice can be challenge when planning to teach a skill. There are a multitude of ways to organise players into groups but whatever system(s) you use, you should ensure time is allocated for this activity in your session plan – the younger the players, the longer this activity usually takes!

As a coach you should be aware of the players' self esteem when organising groups. For example, when younger players choose teams themselves it is often the same person who is chosen last. This 'type' of player is usually someone who either has low skill level or is not popular with the wider group. As the coach you should consider appropriate ways to deal with these individuals so that they are more easily included in all group sessions.

Training Grids

Planning activities to practice the skill that involve all players in the space and time allocated can be a challenge. The grid system has evolved as a means of achieving this.

A grid is an area of playing space that has been sub-divided using lines or cones. The number and size of each grid depends on the number of players and type of activities, and the players are divided accordingly. The principal advantage of using grids is that large groups can be organised efficiently. As a coach, you can observe the activities from outside each grid and monitor player skill acquisition, correct individual faults, and acknowledge correct skill performance.

Progression of Skill

When finalising the plans about how to teach or develop a skill or task within a training session, it is important to consider the steps involved in the skill. If the steps for learning are too large, young players can experience failure and lose their enthusiasm and motivation. If the steps are too small, young players can become bored. For the appropriate progression of a skill, coaches should be able to draw on their own knowledge and break down each skill they plan to teach into smaller components.

Practice for Competition

While basic skill training and practice is essential to skill development, it is one thing to master these skills at practice but another thing entirely to perform those same skills under the pressure of a match. It is important to include opportunities for the players to practice their skills in conditions that resemble as closely as possible the actual competitive situation. Therefore it is recommended that you build “opposed” training sessions into your training plans to ensure the players can reinforce any new skill or technique within a ‘match like’ situation.

Equal Opportunity to Practice and Improve

As a coach you should endeavour to provide all players with the maximum opportunity to improve and practise their skills.

Coaches subconsciously tend to give more time to either the higher skilled players to ensure that their players reach their highest level of ability or to the lower skilled players because they need the most help. By focusing on either of these skill levels the other players “in the middle” tend to be less well supported.

Give Effective Feedback

The information a coach gives to the players about their performance is one form of (extrinsic) feedback. The purpose of feedback is to compare the players' actual performance

in the practice with the desired performance. Effective feedback should help the player learn and develop his or her skills to improve performance.

How the coach gives feedback to the player and how the player receives that feedback are important considerations for effectiveness. Both the coach and the player's communication skills can be a limiting factor in giving and receiving effective feedback.

The following are some guidelines for providing (extrinsic) coach feedback:

1. Feedback should be positive and encouraging, particularly for younger players.
2. Feedback should be constructive - if an error is identified then the coach should provide reasons for the error and possible solutions.
3. Feedback should be given immediately following the performance while it is still fresh in the mind of the player.
4. Feedback should be specific to what the player was asked to perform.
5. Feedback should be consistent with the player's stage of growth and development.
6. Encourage your players to "feel" the action or skill to develop their own (intrinsic) feedback.

When giving feedback, keep in mind that information may stay with learners for between 20 and 30 seconds without reinforcement, so it is important to get younger players practising as soon as possible after feedback. Keep the instructions short and have the younger players focus on only one or two elements at a time.

SKILL ANALYSIS

Introduction

One of the most important roles of the coach is skill analysis - the ability to look at a player, evaluate what is seen, and know what to do next. Skill analysis can be divided into three parts:

1. Observing the player performing a skill.
2. Analysing the effectiveness of the performance.
3. Detecting and correcting errors to improve the player's future performance.

The focus at this level is on observing how the player actually performs the skill. In order to effectively analyse a player's performance the coach needs to understand the skills and plan what to observe and how to observe it.

Divide a Skill into Meaningful Phases

The purpose of the skill

Before the coach can observe and analyse a skill he/she should first identify the purpose of the skill. Understanding the purpose of the skill is important as it helps the coach know what parts of the skill to focus on.

Most skills can be divided into three phases:

1. The Preparatory Phase
2. The Execution Phase
3. The Follow Through Phase

The preparatory phase

The preparatory phase involves movements that get the player ready for the force producing movements in the execution phase. For example, the approach when positioning for a tackle.

The execution

The execution phase can be divided into two parts:

- The force producing movements the players make to produce force for the impact or propulsion. The swing of the leg when place kicking is an example.

- The 'critical instant' is the point of contact (or the release) of the movement. For example, the moment of contact in a place kick. This is the point that determines the effectiveness of the skill.

Successful execution requires the player to apply the correct amount of force, in the correct direction and with precision timing. It is often difficult for the coach to observe and assess the movement within this phase, as the movement takes place very quickly.

The follow through

The follow through refers to the body movements occurring after the execution phase. This phase is where the movement slows down after impact and the player prepares for the next action. For example, the high leg lift after place kicking a goal.

The follow through is important in slowing the body parts down over a longer period of time, absorbing the forces produced and helping to prevent injuries.

Coaches should be aware that all three of these movement phases are equally important to a successful skill performance. For example, close observation of the preparatory or follow through phase will often provide the coach with excellent clues about the effectiveness of the execution phase and the cause of a poor performance.

Develop a Plan to Analyse a Skill

To successfully analyse the skill performance the coach needs to plan how he/she will observe the movement. The coach must decide what to look for and how, when, and where to observe the skill performance or movement.

An observation plan consists of:

1. Identifying the purpose of the skill
2. Dividing the skill into the three movement phases
3. Creating a 'checklist' of key factors for each movement phase
4. Choosing observation strategies, for example:
 1. What angle(s) to observe from?
 2. What to look at?
 3. How many observations of the skill?

Observation strategies – what angle to observe from?

Generally, the observation should be from a position at right angles to the general direction of the player's motion, and opposite the point of interest. However, observing the performance from multiple angles (e.g. side, front and back) is beneficial in giving the coach a number of different perspectives. If the performance covers some distance or moves in different directions, then observations should be from various points.

What to look at

For the first few observations look at the whole skill in general to gain an overall impression of the performance. Then breakdown the movement into component parts and focus on one aspect of the movement at a time.

The outer extremities, the arms and legs, usually move much faster than the body and can be difficult to observe. Start by focusing on the larger, slower moving parts and then work outwards. For example when observing a tackle drill, focus initially on the players overall body posture followed by back and head alignment, the leg positions then arm usage and foot work.

A video camera can be a useful tool to 'capture' the movement. The skill performance can be replayed in slow motion enabling the coach to identify exactly where faults occur. Using a video can help the coach develop his/her own observation and analytical abilities by directing them where to focus their live observations. Ideally, observing the performance while the movement pattern is fresh in the minds of both the coach and the player is also beneficial.

How many observations of the skill

There is no set number of observations to perform for each skill. The number of observations required will depend on the skill of the player and your skill as an observer. Focus on a particular movement long enough to know that the movement pattern is consistently repeated, and that you feel comfortable in being able to describe to yourself and the player what you see.

Be aware that with some activities (*particularly in the younger players*) fatigue will change the player's movement patterns. In activities where fatigue influences performance, it is important to develop the observation plan carefully so as not to waste the player's energy - if possible use a video.

'Cause and Effect' of Movement Observation

Coaches are all too often tempted to correct the symptoms of the fault rather than the actual cause of the fault.

Undertaking the observations – helpful hints

1. As a coach you should be aware of factors that can influence the skill performance. For example; player fatigue, excitement, nervousness; ground or weather conditions; knowledge of the performance required.
2. Ensure that the skill selected to observe is performed in a manner closely related to the competition situation.
3. It can be beneficial to have another coach assist initially in observing and analysing movement skills. This will enable both coaches to compare notes and develop observational and analytical abilities.
4. Taking the time to develop an observation plan will assist the coach develop a greater understanding of what 'skilled' performance is, as well as enhancing his/her overall observation skills.
5. Remember, players will only gain benefit from the systematic observation if the coach is able to provide appropriate and meaningful feedback in a form the player can process.

Summing Up,....

Please feel free to contact me if you are unclear on any of the contents of this paper or if you would like more information on a particular issue.

Once again, the purpose of these notes is not to 'tell' or direct you how to coach your kids to play rugby! You all have your own styles and preferences for how you chose to coach

The intent of this foundation booklet is simply to offer some key teaching 'points for reflection' as you go about the challenging task of coaching youngsters and helping them develop their rugby skills.

These notes have been compiled from a very wide range of 'open source' coaching and teaching references – many from the leading rugby academies, centres of excellence and clubs from around the world. As such, this booklet will act as a useful foundation for those of you who may wish to continue developing your rugby coaching skills and pursue additional IRB/RFU coaching qualifications in the future.

Matt Roper

Coaching Coordinator
BSN RFC