

DEVELOPING AN ELITE RUGBY PLAYER – THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

Introduction

There is no doubt that Rugby Union is a minority sport in the state of South Australia. The competition to attract young players to team sports in South Australia is fierce, in particular the football codes of Australian Rules and Soccer and Basketball have strong player bases. The forces that attract young players to these sports include:

- defined pathways of development to become an elite player.
- lucrative player payment dollars that exist as an elite player.
- the existing traditional sporting ties in South Australia (i.e. Southern Australian states playing predominantly Australian Rules).

The defined development pathways for these sports are well entrenched into the school sporting systems and clubs that exist throughout the state.

Rugby Union must compete against these forces to attract junior players to the game. The exposure of the general public to the Rugby World Cup and Super 12 Rugby has certainly raised the awareness of the code within the state and provided impetus to young persons wanting to play the game.

The development pathways within South Australia for Rugby Union are not typical of those in the Eastern states and may not seem as well defined, however, they do exist and are available to players. There is no doubt that a junior player within South Australia with the right skill set and coaching support can be developed into an elite player. The discussion that follows details the process for the development of a junior rugby player within South Australia by utilising the resources available. The discussion focuses on the tactical and technical skills required by a player to become an elite player within South Australia and the resources utilised to ensure this occurs. I have also included my personal experiences and thoughts in developing an elite rugby player. The time frame for the development of a junior player to an elite level will obviously vary depending on the variety of factors. In South Australia for the reasons outlined above I would believe that the time frame would be some where around 13 years dependant on the resources available.

Discussion

In addition to the teaching of tactical and technical skills the development of an elite rugby player involves many other factors. I believe it is important to understand and explore these factors to fully appreciate the experiences I have had within the South Australian Rugby community.

Finding the elite player

One of the great things about the game of Rugby is that any body type can play the game. It does not matter if you are short or tall, large or small body frame, there is a position on the field that you will be able to play. However, from the development of an elite player's perspective it is important to determine early in the player's life which position is the 'best' position for their body type. For obvious reasons, irrespective of the basic skills that all rugby players are taught, the player can then be developed with that position in mind when determining the level of training required.

Obviously, at a young age it is not easy to determine what body type a junior player may end up but there are two methods, which may assist:

- from a medical perspective, having the player's bone structure X-rayed to determine eventual body height.
- from a genetic/hereditary perspective we can observe the size of the parents of the player in question and see the possible body type outcome for the junior player. By also having discussions with the player's parents you can determine hereditary traits within the family.

From the South Australian experience in developing an elite player, on occasions I have utilised the second method. As the player developed their basic rugby skills I could also focus on the long-term outlook for the player and the possibilities in regard to their eventual position/s.

Socio-economic background

Where a player comes from, their background, their family life are all factors that affect the player's ability to become an elite player. In the demographic area where I have coached there are a significant level of separated families, step parents etc that all have a significant affect on the junior rugby player. However, I have also found that coaching is not only about teaching the players the game of rugby but also dealing with the other issues that junior players have in their everyday life. As a coach and by accepting that issues do exist outside of rugby and dealing with them in a positive manner it is possible to overcome them. In doing this you are also giving players the life skills that

will assist in improving their tactical decision making on the field. Other techniques I have used in overcoming these issues that affect junior players outside of rugby have included:

- as a coach portraying yourself as a positive role model to the players. The old adages 'do as I do, not as I say'.
- continually creating challenges for the players, taking them outside their comfort zone, pushing them to their limits. This in turn enhances their tactical decision making. They understand their limits using it to a greater degree and also know how they will react in certain circumstances.
- as many of the players I have coached come from a strained family environment and some have built up aggression. It is important to capture the imagination of the players, by showing them what they are capable of and where they can possibly end up. This helps the players to channel their aggression in a controlled manner, which is of significant importance on the rugby field.
- always listening to the players and what they have to say. I do not have all the answers and can only continue to learn from each individual player.
- treating the players with respect and teaching them to respect themselves. Earning the respect of the players is paramount, they will not respect the coach unless you give them the respect they deserve. This then leads to learning to respect the opposition and again the tactical skills necessary on the field.
- within a group of junior players it is important to determine early on who are the leaders within the group. By identifying the leaders early and developing their leadership skills (by added responsibility) this will help to speed up the development process for the less skilled players.
- teaching players 80/20 rule. The game of rugby is 80% psychological and 20% physical. Teaching players to develop and hone their mental skills and toughness.

Tactical Skills

If a player has all the necessary technical skills required to play their position and the game in general, then when a particular situation should occur on the field then the player can utilise their tactical skills to readjust throughout the game to the many variables present not allowing players to become one-dimensional.

Players need to have the ability to understand the game and being able to adapt.

Playing in a variety of positions from a young age and being able to understand the

fundamentals of the game whilst appreciating the roles played by other members of the team.

In many cases it is difficult to teach a player the tactical skills of the game. Some players have an inherent ability to adjust to any situation no matter what it is. All players can learn the technical skills but the ability to re-adjust to circumstance can create doubt in players' minds. One of the techniques I have utilised in developing the elite player is the continuous run through of moves. Particularly with young players it is important for them to understand their role on the field. By continually practicing over and over a variety of moves the player can come to understand their role. Some may say this creates a 'robot' player, but in fact this creates a player who is able to complete the basics easily and then have the ability to re-adjust dependant on the change in circumstance that arises i.e. the type of defensive patterns the opposition is running or may be an unexpected breakdown in an attacking move.

Finally, players need to understand what the game of Rugby is trying to achieve. By showing players videos and also have them discuss the game with senior and other elite players they can come to understand the game better.

Technical Skills

The development of technical skills in a player can be taught from many different approaches. The discussion that follows outlines some of the techniques I have utilised to develop the elite player. I have always taken the view when teaching new skills to a junior player that in some cases they are not just for the game of rugby but also life.

Some of the technical skills taught have included:

- The basic Rugby skills – The biomechanics of passing, tackling, scrummaging etc. As I have already outlined I do not confess to know everything about the game so I utilise the resources available to me. Over the years I have brought in current and ex-senior players who I believed they were the best at their 'craft'. The best tackler, the best passer, the best runner, scrummager, line out jumper etc. Not only does this teach the players the technical skills required but also it gives them differing role models who they can confidently approach for additional assistance with their rugby development.
- Body Management – this is an area that I have placed great emphasis on by teaching the players the importance of maintaining their bodies in good physical condition. This has been done by:

- utilising effective fitness programs. Once again bringing in outside assistance to coordinate different fitness programs, keeping the players fresh with different programs (SASI programs non-specific for Rugby, modified for rugby, using the beep test, using sprint coaches)
- teaching players the importance of stretching, warming up and cooling down.
- teaching the players the importance of fluid intake and eating healthy foods. Distributing pamphlets to the players from the government organisations that outline these issues.
- advising young players of the importance of sleep in maintaining high performance levels.
- The importance of breathing correctly. Teaching players to relax and breath deeply at certain times on the field e.g. props preparing their bodies before engagement into the scrum. This ensures the players back and stomach muscles are correctly positioned ad the risk of injury is reduced.
- Injury management – teaching players to manage their injuries correctly, including icing and ensuring suitable recovery periods before re-commencing playing.
- Goal setting – Teaching players the importance of goal setting, not only from a team point of view but also from a personal. Allowing players to understand the available pathways to them and the goals for progress through these pathways are attainable and can be reached. In turn I have found this gives players the impetus to work harder and progress further.
- Cross training – By exposing players to other sports and their skill sets, which can be used within Rugby Union e.g. I have utilised aerobics instructors to break up normal training nights.
- Giving players exposure to issues outside of Rugby e.g. ‘stay off the street and drugs’ programs and by utilising Correctional Services officers giving insight into what could happen if they take the wrong path.
- Teaching players to respect themselves, their fellow team mates, their opposition and have an understanding of multiculturalism and diversity of backgrounds that exist in the game of rugby.
- Finally, ensuring at all times that the fun aspect remains in the game to prevent players from getting stale and ensuring there is a strong social side to playing the game.

Conclusion

The techniques discussed in this paper are not new to the coaching fraternity but have proven with the right application and an efficient use of resources it is quite possible for an elite player to be developed in Rugby irrespective of where they play the game.

I have tried to continually develop my skill set to find new ways to coach players both technical and tactical skills, but also finding the balance with outside life skills.

There is no doubt that South Australia is disadvantaged with not having the structured pathways and coaching facilities afforded by eastern state players, but this is not an impediment to developing the base for a junior in South Australia who can go on to become an elite player.