

# **LEVEL 111 Coaching Course**

**PAUL NIXON**

## **INTRODUCTION**

A survey I conducted of coaches, both senior & junior, revealed that while all coaches are aware of the importance associated with the development of players tactical awareness, little if any specialist training is devoted to this facet. Most available time with their players is spent on developing the individual & unit skill levels of each player. Coaches cited the limited time available with their players (on average - 4 hours training time per week) as the reason for the emphasis on skills, and developing the team cohesion required. Most tactical training is conducted during the end of session “team run”, during which the coach will discuss tactics “on the run” with their players.

Little if any pre or post-match tactical analysis took place with coaches focusing on individual & unit skill assessment and remedy.

It is quite clear that the tactical development is an area that requires more time for training and analysis but is overlooked in favour of skill development. Some would argue that “one is no good without the other” therefore time is required to be devoted to the development of the tactical skills so as players can more often than not utilize their individual & unit skills at the correct time & manner (option taking). How many times do we, as coaches, say - “if only we had taken the right option?”

Of course many variances come into play when assessing & developing these skills eg players field of vision, action/reaction time (reflexes), pressure of opposition, but seeing as though the game of rugby has a dynamic environment players need to be possessed with not only the necessary skills but the wherewithal to fully utilize them.

## **TRAINING SKILLS**

Methods and the skills required for a player to become tactically efficient are many and varied and are only limited by a coaches imagination and innovation and include, but are not limited to the following:

### **VISION**

While this is a separate paper in its own right, I feel it is necessary to touch on the importance of this particular facet. There are many drills, which are available for this area, but not many, if any, are used by coaches in any ongoing degree. Vision development drills are used predominately by coaches as something to do for a change in training and are not part of the regular training plan, therefore are only practiced spasmodically and offer no real value in this format. If they are designed into the training curriculum then the benefits are there and the obvious levels of player improvement are evident. Designing them to be game specific produces a higher result, engenders better player involvement / understanding and players can better gauge their level of progression.

### **VIDEO GAME / PLAYER ANALYSIS**

We have all dabbled in video analysis work predominately to observe team as a whole and to study opposition tactics; individual player strengths etc but have the players done tactical video analysis? Usually a player who does self-analysis identifies individual skill deficiency but doesn't look at the overall component of the game. Having the players do analysis based on the tactical structure of a particular game will focus the player on the total scheme of the game and induce an extra level of understanding and learning for the game. Instead of asking the player to do an analysis based on how many tackles made/missed, hit ups, penalties conceded etc (these are all extremely important statistics and should not be dismissed) ask them to assess the game from a coaches perspective. Eg What defensive pattern was the opposition running and in what parts of field? What would you as coach have said at ½ time? What personnel / positional changes would you have made during game and why? Why was opposition no. 7 dominating at the breakdown?

Once again, it is only limited by the coaches' imagination as to what questions and format you ask your players to report. You can tailor an analysis to be position specific and it can be done on any level, but is only as good as the time you as a coach devote to the follow up of the analysis. If you only give it a "brush over" then the players will not submit the effort required for all to receive the benefit that is available. Assign and spend some time to discuss with the player his analysis and make it a learning experience and ask the player how this learning can be transferred to the current team environment.

## WORKSHOPS

The conducting of workshops within the training module is also a beneficial aspect of tactical training. These workshops can be held pre or post physical training and should be built into the session timeframe so as to not overburden players with time. Once again these sessions are only limited to the imagination of the coach as to what format, scenarios etc. As an example, you could divide your team into units with lets say tight 5, backrow/halves and centers/back 3. Give each unit a scenario (or more if time permitting) and they have a timeframe in which to put together a presentation, which will be presented to other units on the whiteboard. (It is wise to have your coaching/management team roam the room watching and listening as to what players have input into the process and what players just sit and watch and go along with everything which is said – nominate the player who sits and watches as that groups presenter – pretty soon they will get the message that they can't sit back and let someone else do it.). After the time is up, announce the nominated presenters to come forward and submit their presentation (once again have a time limit). Each of the non-presenting groups gets to ask a question of the presentation relating to a tactical facet. Establishment of player input game plans are also beneficial conducted in this manner, as it gives the coach the opportunity to dissect information from the players, which in most cases will throw up differing options/scenarios than the coach has already established.

While these workshops are always useful as a tactical learning experience they are also excellent as team building exercises, variety to training and are mentally stimulating and enjoyable.

## QUESTIONING PLAYERS

Strategic questioning is also a useful tool in promoting players to have a more wholesale approach towards the game. This can be done pre, during and post sessions/games and will influence players to accept more empowerment towards the task. When the coach asks a question, players must find an answer, which in turn will increase their understanding and knowledge of that particular facet of the game and encourage them to be creative and make a decision. It also assists the coach in not becoming overly directive in their approach. This will inspire players to learn not just how to execute the skills, but where, when, why to best utilize them. Players will relish the opportunity to have input into the process and therefore their involvement will be greater. You will find that the player who normally doesn't say anything and has little or no input will become more vocally involved as the players become encouraged to think. It is important to mention that positive reinforcement of a player's response to questioning is imperative as if they find little or no support for their answers they will be less motivated to respond for fear of ridicule. As a coach you may well be pleasantly surprised by how much your players do know and how quickly they learn.

It is also an avenue for learning by the coach, by listening to responses, re-questioning for more complete answers, continually challenging the thinking of the players which makes this style beneficial for all.

Pre planning of meaningful questions is a major element in establishing a good questioning technique. Plan for your upcoming session with questions relating to that session, which you as coach foresee as areas that lend themselves to problem solving and tactical questioning.

Each coach will develop, in conjunction with the players, a style which best fits that team and utilize it in a manner that produces the best results. There is an old saying “asking the correct questions takes as much skill as giving the correct answers”. It is up to the coach to find a level within their team in which both coach and player are receiving benefit from this coaching style.

### HOMEWORK

As coaches do “homework”, it seems that due to time constraints, players should seek improvement by contributing to “out of hours” study and learning also. This can take place at end of session with “homework” discussed and distributed to players for return at next session. This “homework” should pertain to the previous session and should focus on practiced skills and where/when/how to utilize those skills. Time is required to devote to follow up & marking of “homework” to give it a sense of worth from the players perspective. Creating time to discuss with the player is always beneficial and you as a coach get to learn from/about the player as well.

### GAME SENSE TRAINING

Much is already written about the benefits of Game Sense Training and I won't elaborate too much on it, but it is an extremely important learning module in tactical development.

Traditional coaching approaches tend to produce individually skilled players who are not necessarily able to produce in the game situation when placed under extra pressure. These players usually don't have a great understanding of the tactical issues of the game, as they tend to concentrate on the physical performance and give little time to the tactical thinking aspects.

The Games Sense style of learning emphasizes understanding, problem solving, decision-making, vision, tactical awareness and players learn where their skills fit in and can decide when, where and why to best utilize them, not just how.

### OPPOSED TRAINING

On most occasions players practice their unit skills unopposed without receiving the benefit of performing under pressure from opposition. These sessions are only honing the players skill technique and are not utilizing other skills which are critical to a players overall performance eg decision making under time and space constraints, visual awareness, problem solving, reaction time etc.

Without this pressure players become comfortable with their skills and when placed under duress are usually unable to adapt, therefore their performance is affected.

Tactical decision making can best be developed by placing the player in as near to game situations as frequently as possible during training sessions so as the player has a feeling of familiarity with most scenarios that are encountered during a game. As the environment in a game of rugby is so dynamic, it also encourages the coach to design, develop and implement new, innovative training scenarios to constantly challenge the thinking of the players.

### **TEAM RUNS**

The team run has traditionally been conducted at the end of a session to put into practice the skills/ tactics that have been performed during the session. It is usually run unopposed and with little thought other than “it must be done.” Most players see this as being beneficial to practice running lines, moves etc. but it can be a very useful tactical development coaching tool for the coach. The coach can “build in” some tactical scenarios during these runs, which will introduce some decision-making processes. Some examples of these are: the captain making a decision from a penalty; informing team that opposition blindside flanker is in the sin bin; altering the opposition defensive patterns etc etc.

The coach has the option to set the scenarios to imitate the upcoming opposition to attune players to those possibilities. Once again it is only limited by a coaches imagination.

### **CONCLUSION**

Whilst I acknowledge there are time constraints on coaches with their players, with some astute prior planning, time can be made available for tactical development which will assist to create an environment where the players are confident in their decision making and in this way they become more responsible and are more willing to take ownership of the learning process.

The learning of matching skills to various game situations will allow players to become more comfortable and confident with their execution under the pressure of the dynamic game environment.

By constantly challenging the thinking of the players their tactical decision making development will advance, their participation level in all facets will increase, therefore contributing to a learning, enjoyable, stable and ultimately successful environment for all concerned.