

RUGBY RUGBY GAME SENSE

WHAT IS 'GAME SENSE'?

Game sense is an approach to coaching and teaching which uses games as a learning tool to:

- increase the motivation of players, and
- develop tactical and strategic thinking as well as skill development.

This approach to coaching and teaching is 'game centred' rather than 'technique centred'. Traditionally, technique has been the focus of training sessions - often taught in isolation, without requiring players to think and bearing little resemblance to the skill required in the game. We have all seen players practising technique.

***For example:** undertaking numerous repetitions of a scrum half's pass or religiously practising the side on tackle.*

While the technique itself is an important part of the overall skill, there is limited value in technique practice that doesn't take into account the other factors involved in executing the skill.

***For example:** making a decision on which pass to give, or deceiving the defender using evasion skills.*

The game centred approach focuses on the coach or teacher designing practices that progressively challenge and motivate players to develop an understanding of the strategies, skills and rules required to succeed in games.

It makes the game the focus of the practice session (rather than the technique), and challenges the players to think about what they are actually doing and why.

The players must first establish an understanding of what the game is about. The technique follows when the need for it is established.

***For example:** the spin pass would be taught when the player had established through game experience when best to use the pass to put the receiver in space.*

WHAT ROLE DOES THE COACH/TEACHER TAKE IN THE GAME CENTRED APPROACH?

An important aspect of the game centred approach is the role that the coach/teacher takes in relation to the players. Traditionally, training sessions have been 'coach dominated', with players being told where to stand, how to defend a situation etc.

The emphasis with the game centred approach is on the players making decisions within the game, rather than the coach/teacher telling the players where to run and who to throw to. The coach/teacher becomes more of a facilitator, creating situations where players have to find solutions for themselves (i.e. problem solving). Many physical educators have been using this approach for some years with great success. Independent thinking and self-reliance in the player are desired outcomes. The approach also assists in developing skills in areas such as communication, leadership and teamwork.

WHY USE A GAME CENTRED APPROACH?

People (especially children) love to play games. How many times have coaches and teachers heard the cry 'when can we play a game?'. The game centred approach promotes maximum participation - a key to children remaining involved in sport. But there are many other reasons for using a game centred approach. These include:

- Promoting long-term learning (if players discover things for themselves, then they are more likely to learn from the experience and retain the information longer).

- Catering for all ability levels by encouraging players to choose the level they wish to play at (e.g. a player may wish to catch the ball using hands and chest, while another may choose only hands). The emphasis is less on the textbook execution of the technique and more on the player developing an understanding of the tactical aspects.
- Assisting the beginner coach/teacher with limited technical knowledge of a sport and inexperience in group management. For instance, for these coaches/teachers:
 - it is more appropriate to set challenges for players through games rather than conduct technique based sessions (which may be based on 'unsound' interventions due to lack of technical knowledge)
 - management is often easier if the players are having fun
 - positive social interaction between players and coaches/teachers is encouraged
 - it promotes affiliation (i.e. feeling part of a team or group)
 - it helps avoid developing players with inflexible techniques (i.e. players who are unable to cope with change in their environment)
 - it encourages the player's understanding of the need for rules (i.e. rules are there to make the game better, not to prevent us from doing things).

HOW SHOULD WE APPROACH THE COACHING OF BEGINNER ATHLETES?

"The young player needs to be coached by a person who can visualise what sort of senior player they are going to be"

(Patrice Hagelauer, Head of French Men's Tennis Federation)

"The junior player needs to be coached by a person who is interested in developing the adult player, but who maximises the pleasures (and advantages) of being a child"

(Rod Thorpe, Loughborough University)

"Cater for varying levels of ability so that all juniors have a 'fair go' (in practice and competition)"

(Australian Sports Commission, National Junior Sports Policy, 1994)

"A key element in a coaching relationship is the development of independence"

(British Sports Council, Code of Ethics, 1991)

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A TECHNIQUE AND A SKILL?

A 'technique' is a movement performed in isolation at practice. A 'skill' is the performance of the technique in a game. A simple equation to help describe this is **'Technique + Game context = Skill'** ('game context' refers to elements such as pressure, decision making, timing, use of space and risk).

One of the major problems with just teaching a technique, is that players end up practising a movement that bears little in relation to what actually happens in a game.

***For example:** hours have often been spent instructing players in the correct (but stationary) technique for passing and receiving the ball in the game of rugby. In reality, the pass and catch that occurs in the game bears little resemblance to what has been practised. In the game, players are on the move, trying to outwit their opponent to get to the ball, and looking for the next passing option.*

One of the key messages in the game centred approach is that we can teach players skills that they actually use in a 'real' game. Using 'minor' games that involve aspects such as opponents and time limits will help players to develop skills that are realistic to the game.

SO WHEN DO YOU FOCUS ON TECHNIQUE?

The dilemma for the coach or teacher is when to concentrate on the tactical aspects, and when to assist a player with a technique difficulty. As a guide, the following model can be used:

- players are introduced to a game requiring skills that are both tactical (what to do) and technical (how to do it)
- the players develop an understanding of the game, and identify the technical and tactical skills required
- if necessary, the coach or teacher may intervene to assist players with technical skills (players can appreciate why a particular technique is valuable) or discuss tactical aspects
- players again practice the skills in conditions that relate to the game.

SESSION OUTLINE OF GAME CENTRED APPROACH

Traditional training sessions have focused on the development of technique, often overlooking 'why' and 'where' the technique fits in to the game. An alternative approach to structuring training is as follows:

- warm-up
- game
- questions and challenges - what are we trying to do (tactical), how we can do it better (technique and tactical)
- return to game
- further questions and challenges
- progression of game
- repeat the above cycle
- cool-down

In the above model, techniques are still taught, but only in the context of the game.

WHEN SHOULD YOU CORRECT TECHNIQUE?

The dilemma for many coaches and teachers is whether or not to try and change a player's 'natural' style to one that is perceived as being more efficient. Most coaches/teachers have experienced the frustration of trying to change a player's techniques, only to see the player revert back to their old style under pressure.

Before attempting to make technique changes, the coach/teacher should consider the following:

- player confidence as well as physical readiness (i.e. is the player mentally ready to accept change as well as physically ready). This could be influenced by a variety of factors such as self-esteem and the athlete's perception of their own ability
- whether the coach/teacher believes they can make a correction in the time available (i.e. if you cannot fix it, don't touch it!)
- the ability of the coach/teacher to 'put it right' (i.e. coaches/teachers should be wary of identifying and conveying errors if they cannot solve them)
- whether changing the techniques will actually affect the end result (i.e. if a player is having success with a technique that isn't 'out of the textbook', then seriously consider whether there really is a need to change it). Note: coach/teacher should consider whether the 'unusual' technique's is safe.

Within the game centred approach, modifications are made on an individual basis, rather than a whole group basis (e.g. the coach/teacher works with individuals or small groups of players who they believe are ready to make an adjustment to a technique.)

CORRECTING TECHNIQUE v TEACHING A NEW TECHNIQUE

An alternative to trying to change an existing technique is to teach the player a new technique (ie. add a new technique to a player's repertoire).

***For example:** the rugby coach/teacher may decide to teach a player a new pass, rather than focusing on the old well-grooved technique. Eventually, the coach/teacher plans that the new pass will become the dominant one, but if the old technique occurs under pressure for a time, there is no major cause for concern.*

This approach is a more positive one than focusing on a player's perceived weakness. The young player's self-esteem can often be quite fragile, and the coach/teacher needs to avoid turning a minor technique fault into a major mental block!!

IMPLEMENTING THE GAME CENTRED APPROACH

TYPES OF SPORTS

While most sports can implement aspects of the game centred approach, there are some sports that are particularly suited to using it. They can be classified as follows:

Target sports

archery, darts, golf, lawn bowls, ten pin bowling, bocce, croquet, billiards and snooker

Net and wall games (divided and shared court)

badminton, squash, tennis, table tennis and volleyball

Striking/fielding games

cricket, softball and baseball

Invasion games

hockey, football, American football, rugby league, rugby union, touch, water polo, basketball, netball, lacrosse, handball, polo and polocrosse.

There are other sports not listed above that may also benefit from using aspects of the game centred approach. Developing strategic thinking in athletes is also relevant in sports where technique and physical capabilities are usually considered paramount.

***For example:** race strategies, and responding to competitors tactics, are important aspects in a sport such as rowing.*

MODIFICATION FOR EXAGGERATION

For many years in Scotland, sporting equipment and competition rules have been modified to cater for the needs of out young players. In the game centred approach, the coach modifies the game to exaggerate or emphasise particular tactical aspects.

***For example:** to emphasise the tackle, a long narrow pitch should be marked out, so there is little space and plenty of contact.*

Modifications that can be made to achieve a variety of tactical outcomes include:

- the dimensions of the playing area

- equipment to be used
- number of passes allowed
- number of players in attack and defence
- scoring system - including penalty or bonus points for particular plays
- time allowed
- specific roles for players (eg. support players)
- adding or deleting game rules

Note: Often skills or rules from another sport can add a new dimension to a game.

Listed below are some examples of the tactical aspects that can be emphasized.

Tactical aspects **Questions to pose (coach)**

Deception	How can you make you opponent go to their left?
Risk	Is the long pass worth the risk in this situation?
Time	How can you give yourself time to recover from the last tackle?
Stage of the game	You are two points down in the closing stages of the game. How will you attack the next play?
Space (creating or limiting)	Where are the best spaces to run to receive the ball? How will this impact on where your team-mates go?
Decision making	Should you go for the line, or try to pass wide into space?
Anticipation	What is the most likely response from your opponent in this situation?
Defensive patterns	Do you think you should use a zone defence, or double-team the key scorer?
Regaining possession	How can you regain possession after a turnover?

Minimising angles of attack	How can you reduce the angle for the attacker moving towards the line?
Attacking and scoring	Would it be better to use the width of the field, or try to penetrate the line?
Keeping possession	Should you evade your opponent or pass the ball?

DEVELOPING GAMES

Many games already exist within most sports. The key is adapting them to emphasize tactical aspects, and using a coaching style that challenges players to find the answers for themselves. For those wanting to develop new games, here are a few key questions:

- What are the tactics and skills you are trying to develop within this game?
- What modifications/exaggerations can you make to emphasize the above?
- What will be the main challenge or problem for the players to solve?
- What are the boundaries and safety rules?
- How do you score or gain points in this game?
- How do the players move? how does the ball move?
- How will the game start and re-start after scoring?
- What are some key questions you need to ask the players?
- What progressions can you make to increase the complexity? Can you give the players some choices in these progressions?
- Are you catering for all the individuals - do you need to give some choices in equipment and skill execution?
- Will the game encourage maximum participation and communication between the players?
- How will you place the game within the training session?

WHY USE QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES?

Questioning is a useful method of encouraging players to think about what they are doing and to analyse their own actions. It is a good strategy to avoid the coach/teacher becoming overly directive, and promotes a 'joint approach' to the game. By questioning

and challenging the players, the coach/teacher is promoting an atmosphere of learning and problem solving. Inquisitive players will usually make the best tacticians and play makers.

Asking a question does not always have to mean that the coach/teacher has the answer. Challenging the players to 'find out for themselves' is an approach the coach should not be afraid of if they do not feel confident of the 'answer' themselves.

In many situations, the coach/teacher may not actually be looking for one 'right' answer to a problem. A response of 'it depends' from the player can be the best answer of all. Usually the 'answer' will depend on the circumstances of the moment. Coaches and teachers should strive to develop players who can find 'the answer' in relation to varying sets of circumstances.

HOW DO YOU DESIGN QUESTIONS AND SET CHALLENGES?

One of the key roles for the teacher or coach, is the use of questions. It is important for the coach to ask questions which are open-ended and will encourage the players to think

For example:

- *'Where is the best spot to hit the ball?'*
- *'Where will it be more difficult for you opponent to score from?' and "How can you force them to that position?'*
- *'What is the best way to defend this situation?'*
- *'How can you reduce the space that your opponent can score from?'*
- *'If your opponent evades you, what will you do?'*
- *'Is it better to pass or run with the ball in this situation?' 'Why?'*

Questions will generally relate to a particular tactical aspect. As a rough guide questions can relate to tactics as follows:

TIME When will you.....

SPACE Where is.....

RISK Which option.....

Remember that the age and ability level of the players you are dealing with will influence the complexity of the questions you are asking. Make sure when you ask a question, that you give the player or group time to think and respond (don't answer the question for them!)

Questioning is not something that comes naturally to everyone. It is a skill that needs to be practised. With experience, you should be able to design questions that fir particular

situations. It may be useful to list some possible questions prior to the practice session to assist you.

WHEN DO YOU ASK QUESTIONS AND SET CHALLENGES?

Although there is no definitive answer to this, the following can be used as a guide:

- Start the game with some general challenges to the players

***For example** 'I want you to try and work out the best way to defend this situation' or 'See if you can score more than five tries in the next two minutes'.*

- You may have an opportunity to question individuals during the game

***For example** 'Billy, which player do you think, was the best option to pass to - Jack or John?'*

Look for natural breaks in the play to do this. If possible, try to tie positive feedback to the player into this

***For example** 'Good pass John, now think about where is the best space to move to next to be in a good support position'.*

- Let the game be played uninterrupted as long as possible. This gives the players the chance to settle into the game, and gives you the opportunity to observe the players.
- During breaks to rotate players may be the best time to speak to the group. Re-stating the original question/challenge in a different way might be necessary if the players haven't achieved the desired outcomes. Make sure you check the players have understood the outcome you want them to try and achieve.
- If the game is working well, it may be time to take the next step and add an additional challenge to the game. If it isn't working well, be prepared to modify or simplify it.
- Don't be concerned if some players are responding as though 'tactically aware' and others aren't. Consider individual readiness. You may want to devise different challenges for different players to cater for this.

Remember that by asking a question, you are not necessarily seeking a verbal response from the players. At times you may pose a question which you want answered by the player's actions in the game. make it clear to the players what sort of response you are seeking.

SUMMARY

The game centred approach to coaching and teaching uses games to develop tactical and strategic thinking as well as skill development. It makes the game the focus of the practice session (rather than the technique) and challenges the players to think about what they are actually doing and why.

The question 'why use this approach' can be looked at from two angles:

'It makes sense to play games'

If games are carefully designed, then all sorts of learning can occur whilst we have fun!

'Making sense of games'

Have we de-emphasised the 'understanding' aspects of games coaching and teaching and focused too much on technique?

The emphasis with the game centred approach is on player centred learning. This involves the coach/teacher becoming more of a facilitator, creating situations where players have to find solutions for themselves (i.e. problem solving).

Unlike most traditional sessions where technique practice is the focus, the game centred approach places the game at the start of the training session. Technique practice occurs within the game context, and only when the players have established the need for the technique.

The key to developing games within this approach is modification or exaggeration of various aspects of the game to create tactical outcomes and promote problem solving.

The use of questioning by the coach/teacher is central to this approach. Posing questions and setting challenges encourages players to 'learn for themselves' with the coach/teacher providing a guiding role.

The game centred approach promotes a holistic approach to coaching and teaching. It is an approach that can be used with players from beginner to elite level by coaches and teachers with varying degrees of experience.