

**ARU – Level III**  
**Work task 11**

**The Physical Education Teacher as Coach: A**  
**Fundamental Conflict of Interest?**

Submitted by: Craig Pain  
HKSAR

For many young people their first taste of rugby has traditionally come either in school or at the local rugby club, presided over by the physical education teacher or the club coach (often an enthusiastic parent.)

In recent years there has been a tendency for the focus of initial rugby knowledge to move away from schools and more towards clubs. Clubs that have recognised a gap in the development of young players and have moved to fill that gap by introducing mini rugby sections, have done a great deal to guarantee their own continuing success, through ensuring a steady supply of young players filtering through to the more senior level.

But the influence of schools, physical education and sport programmes and those that run them is still a major influencing factor in the development of players, and in ensuring that players maintain their commitment to the game.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly examine the role of the coach and compare it to that of the teacher, and to examine whether there are conflicts between the two roles, particularly when one individual is playing both roles.

Particularly in Hong Kong, and this situation is probably not uncommon in other countries, coaches are often also physical education / sports teachers. For example in Hong Kong this year the current U16, U19, HKSAR 7's and National coach are all or were all teachers. Whether this has a bearing on how or what they coach or what values they bring to the coaching situation is an interesting topic to examine.

Rainer Martins (1990) when discussing success in sport states that:

Is success winning games? Yes, in part, winning is an aspect of successful coaching. But successful coaching is much more than just winning games. Successful coaches help athletes master new skills, enjoy competing with others, and feel good about themselves. Successful coaches not only are well versed in the techniques and skills of their sports, they know how to teach these skills to young people. And successful coaches not only teach athletes sports skills, they also teach and model the skills needed for successful living in our society. **(Page ix)**

Martins here appears to be suggesting that winning games is only part of the make up of a successful coach. Indeed the authors view is that the coach, along with the teacher is foremost an educator, and certainly at the lower levels of the game there is a very large overlap between the two roles and very few differences.

The coach needs to develop skills, attitudes, team spirit, communication and everything else that goes into producing successful, motivated team players. The coach could predominantly be viewed as a feedback conduit, reviewing and analysing performances, developing strategies to up skill players and team skills, but above all else as a person able to communicate these aspects effectively and efficiently in order to produce more successful teams.

The teacher obviously shares many of these traits, and whilst it is very difficult to fully expound upon the teachers role exactly, there is one obvious factor that separates the teacher from the coach.

In teaching, the goal is to educate young people, not only in the subject matter, but also in the social values and mores expected within the society. The teacher educates his students to become better people, or to have more value to society through the medium of his subject. In other words the physical education teacher uses sports not only as a be all and end all, but also as a medium through which the prevalent

societies values system can be inculcated, hopefully resulting in the young person being able to play a useful and fulfilling role in society.

The assertion here is that the major differentiating factor between coaching and teaching is winning. The teacher educates with the ultimate goal of producing an adult who has use to the society in which he lives. Whilst the coach educates players ultimately with the express aim of winning sporting contests.

This simplistic view of the differences between the coach and the teacher becomes more apparent the higher up ‘the rugby ladder’ you venture. At the international level the ultimate (and sometimes only) goal is to win the contest, and whilst the laws of the game are there to ensure fair play, these laws are often pushed to the limit and crossed in the name of success.

It could be suggested here that at the lower levels of the game, the focus is on educating players and conflicts of interest would not be apparent. But as the level of competition develops, and the importance of winning increases, so to does the possibility of conflicting interests arise.

Martins (1900) states that:

Striving to win is important in sport. That process can bring out the best in young people – in their performance, commitment, and moral development. For sport to provide these benefits, you must maintain a proper perspective on winning... Remember that striving to win the game is an important objective of the contest, but it is not the most important objective of sport participation. It is easy to lose sight of the long –term objectives – helping athletes develop physically, psychologically, and socially – while pursuing the short-term objective of winning the contest. **(Page 8)**

What is becoming clearer is that context in which the sporting activity takes place is an essential ingredient in determining the moral and ethical boundaries to which a coach and his players must adhere. In children the win at all costs attitude has no

place,( although this is often overlooked in the heat of a contest.) And what is appropriate at the senior level would be totally inappropriate at the more junior level. In fact it could be hypothesised that the roles of the teacher and the role of the rugby coach in children's rugby are very similar.

Lee (1993) states that:

Coaching children differs from coaching adults in that the athletes are more easily influenced and constantly faced with new situations and experiences. At the time when they are most involved in sport, say between the ages of six and 16, children undergo rapid changes in which they are greatly affected by what happens to them and around them. So coaches have the added responsibility of taking on an educational function which has an effect beyond sport itself. That means that they must be aware of the impact their priorities and actions have on the children they coach. **(Page 28)**

At the school and youth level, both teaching and coaching appear to be very similar, the values expounded and the example set by the coach are values the players often try to emulate. In this way the coach has a moral and ethical responsibility to respect the values prevalent within the society in which the activity is taking place.

Lee (1993) maintains that

...Sport is an arena for values testing. For example, coaches may often be faced with the choice of insisting that children play fairly, even when they are likely to lose a contest, or showing them how to cheat in order to win it. This is a conflict between personal values of success at whatever cost and social values of moral responsibility. Each coach's value system affects the way he or she decides. **(Page 29)**

These sentiments may appear to be idealistic to the seasoned senior coach whose job may depend on winning, but are important, if not essential factors to be taken into consideration when coaching at all levels, particularly at the junior level but also including the most senior players.

The opinion of Bill Shankly (Daintith 1994), one of Britain's most successful coaches, albeit in a different code, that:

Football isn't a matter of life or death – it's much more important than that.

(Page 267).

And Vince Lombardi's assertion (Metcalf, 1986) that:

Winning isn't everything – it's the only thing.

(Page 268)

These sentiments may still hold true at the highest level of coaching in many sports.

Sponsors expect results and investors a return on their investment, to do this teams must be successful. Success in this context means winning, little wonder then that the win at all costs ethos is seemingly more prevalent today.

With the increasing corporate control evident in today's sporting contests, with the reliance on money generated by television rights, sponsorship deals and corporate branding, it is little wonder that the importance of winning has increased.

The rewards of professionalism and the demands of sporting life in a 'new' era have contributed to this importance and have led to a great deal more questioning on the rights and wrongs of certain types of sporting behaviour.

Many sports have moved quickly to stamp out foul or negative play and to reward positive tactics. But one of the most insidious results of the increased importance placed on winning, is the effect the behaviour of players and coaches has on the young people coming into today's game. What younger players see happening on the field and on television they accept as being the 'right' way to play the game. With the increased exposure of the game world-wide the responsibilities on the coach and players, not only to provide an entertaining game, but also to play the game in the

'right' way (by 'right' we are referring to an implied set of ethical values.) have increased enormously. It is no longer acceptable just to play the game, the demands are now on winning and winning well.

In summary, it can be seen from the above discussion that the roles of the coach and the teacher are very closely intertwined. Both are concerned with increasing skills, developing techniques, attitudes, values and collegiality.

Where there is a difference in the end result of this work, the coach coaches for all of these reasons, but ultimately coaches to win. To a large degree the importance placed on winning will determine the values exhibited by the team. As the importance of winning increases there will be an increase in the possibility of the teacher's and coaches roles coming into conflict.

When a teacher is fulfilling the role of 'coach' the situation becomes even more complex, in that, what players may do, or need to do in order to win a game, may well be in direct conflict with the coaches other role, that of teacher.

In coaching under eight mini rugby in Hong Kong, I have a very definite view of the skills and attitudes I wish to develop in my players. Sometimes, even at this level it has proved to be very difficult to adhere to these views, given parental pressure and player pressure to win games, and oppositions attitudes often leading to the team having to adopt tactics that really are not in their best interests developmentally.

Martins (1990) sums the situation up succinctly when he states that:

When winning is kept in perspective, sport programs produce young people who enjoy sports, who strive for excellence, who dare to risk error in order to learn, and who grow with both praise and constructive criticism.

**(Page 8)**

Everyone involved in sport has an opinion on how the game should be played. Is it right to kill the ball at the ruck or maul? Or to give a penalty away to save a try? Only the coach and the players involved in a game can tell you. As a team game played by a group of individuals, all with their own backgrounds and differing reasons for playing there is no right answer. But what is clear, is that it is the prevailing culture in the team or group that will have a great effect on the way the game is played. If winning is the central reason for playing then at some point there will be conflicts between what needs to be done to win a game, and how far players and coaches are prepared to go in order to be successful.

In a situation where winning is important the chances of conflict situations arising between the roles of coach and teacher is very high, but ultimately it is how the individuals involved resolve the inevitable ethical questions they are asked that will set the tone for how the game is played.

Only when the importance of winning can be kept in perspective can we expect ethical and moral considerations to be given a central role in the sporting arena at all levels of the game. And only when this situation occurs can we expect that the role of coach and the role of the teacher will not come into conflict.

Looking at the current state of the game of rugby, and more widely at sport generally it can be seen that winning is and has for a long time been of central importance, particularly at the national level. Whilst this situation continues, there will inevitably be areas of conflict between what is best for a player, a coach or an organisation and what a team needs to do to win a game.

The role of the coach or the teacher throughout these situations is vital; conflicts will inevitably occur when the demands of the game bring the coach, or teacher to question their own values.

Ultimately even though we are discussing a team game, we are dealing with individuals, as such the coach or teacher sets the tone for how the game should be played and sets the limits for the players, either consciously or sub-consciously. Within the organisation it would appear that the importance placed on winning is a prime factor in values testing. And that conflict between individuals holding different roles (sometimes at the same time) are more likely to occur as the importance of winning increases.

What is essential then is to ensure that the process, rather than the product is made central to the development of the team. Players should be free to develop as people and as rugby players in an environment that is supportive and not reliant upon extrinsic rewards to bolster self-worth.

Bizley (1997) sums up the over-riding situation succinctly when he suggests that:

When you take part in sport you have many moral decisions to make and one of the most important of these is how fairly you decide to play..... All physical activities have some rules or regulations that people taking part must follow. Having a good sporting attitude means playing within these rules or regulations and being totally fair, even to the point where it could cost you the game. (Page 24)

An idealistic opinion in many ways, but one that is definitely worth exploring if we are to get the best out of our players, coaches and teams.

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