

LEVEL 3 COACHING ASSIGNMENT 13

Decision Making During Phase Play

Rugby is a game played largely in an 'open' environment, that is, there are a host of factors that influence the decisions that players make besides their own skills and experiential qualities. These exterior factors include, amongst others: prevailing weather and pitch conditions, score, playing record, game plan, performance goals and most importantly the opposition players and team-mates. This assignment will look to outline the implications that this has on our ability to make decisions in a complex and ever changing environment and then follow with suggestions for consideration when coaching players. For the purpose of this assignment 'phase play' will be defined as those phases of play that occur after set piece and restarts.

Decisions have to be made in the broad areas of attack, defence, support, tackle/ruck/maul (TRM) contest and during counter attack. In all situations there is a tremendous amount of information presented to a player for them to base their decisions, however, what is of critical importance is that those decisions are effective and made as quickly as possible - this amount of information is what presents as a possible area of concern.

Pierre Villepreux (1993), in his influential paper, suggested that players must learn to interact not only with their teammates but also in relation to the actions and reactions of opponents. The optimum decision making occurs when a ball carrier makes the right decision in relationship to what the defence are doing and support players react appropriately.

This deals directly with the area of perception. Perception is the making sense of information received. It involves the detection of stimuli (in rugby this is primarily visual and auditory), its comparison with what we already know (stored in our long term memory) and its recognition – if we do not recognize the stimuli then we are only guessing at what might be an appropriate response. Once we have recognized the stimuli we may then select a response and initiate a response programme to execute those movements. This is extremely important when we consider how we are going to coach decision making. Allard and Starkes (Perception in Sport: Volleyball. *Journal of Sports Psychology*) wrote that perceptual skills of players is best described as a rapid visual search specific to the ball as target and that it is related to playing experience.

As well as making the correct decision our response time is also critical. Response time is defined as reaction time + movement time. Reaction time is the speed with which we make a decision. More specifically, in rugby we are dealing with Choice Reaction Time where there are a number of possible decisions, as opposed to Simple Reaction Time which is what a sprinter reacting to the starter's gun is faced with. The conclusion must be that the more stimuli our players recognize then the more likely it is that they will choose the correct response quickly. Chase and Simon (*Perception in Chess, Cognitive Psychology* 1973) suggested that increased recall accuracy is

specific to game situations. Again this has implications for the manner in which we coach decision making.

As well as the number of possible decisions, other factors to consider are the time available to make a decision, the potential inherent 'risk' of a decision, the arousal level of the player and their ability to anticipate what is going to occur. Players who can predetermine what happens next respond faster, and there is a need to coach effective visual skills. During Sir Clive Woodward's tenure as England coach, players were taught the concept of T-CUP (thinking clearly under pressure) and as part of this, players were encouraged to scan and check touchline – crossbar – touchline (TCT) in order to gain an insight as to how the opposition were responding to their play.

Implications for Coaching

It has been established that what is of critical importance to effective and quick decision making is the recognition of stimuli from the players' environment. Transfer of practice to the game environment depends on the extent to which practice or training resembles the game (Magill 1993).

Damian Farrow (RFU paper) makes the point that well skilled decision makers have usually had extensive experience in team based game play as children in a variety of sports, and have as a consequence, learnt to read patterns. This has an enormous implication for LTPD and avoiding young players specialising too early. Many young players have fallen into the trap of 'more is better'. A positive example is Pat Howard who made his school's Rugby 3rd XV but at the same time was part of the Australian Schools Basketball programme. His future prowess as a highly accomplished test rugby player is well documented.

A team with a sound knowledge of the game who have spent time reading the same cues and making similar decisions, will lead to unity and continuity (Joel Dunn 2007). Villepreux also suggests that players must develop a common and consistent interpretation of the game at speed. Lee Smith contends that players must learn more about the game as a whole and that learning about the game holistically provides greater context for players in their decision making efforts. Richard Shuttleworth (AIS) has written that we must emphasise the ability of the ball carrier to engage the opposition, then switch focus to the support players and for the team as a whole to be able to adapt to unexpected changes.

All advocate the development of a common code to aid players in analysing the problems posed by an opposition, and then to practice applying this code during game like situations during training, thus establishing a consistent set of reference points for the players. This in turn will allow players to analyse simultaneously the problems faced, anticipate what will happen and choose an appropriate action.

Dr Damian Farrow in his RFU paper ('Reading the Play in Team Sports'), indicates that research suggests that the best decision makers have the ability

to accurately recall patterns, and that the more games played the more accustomed to attacking and defensive strategies we become. Experience allows us to recognize a situation as typical and within our range of understanding – the greater the experience the greater the understanding (David Hadfield).

During training, players must be exposed to situations and scenarios that they will be presented with during game play. If skills coached and learnt during training are not transferable to game play, then training can become largely a wasted exercise or at best an exercise in becoming accomplished at drills with no real context as regards the playing of the game.

The coach acts as facilitator providing realistic experiences and guiding players to possible appropriate decisions and responses. To this end the coach, according to player experience, must allow players to discover for themselves possible solutions and decisions to problems presented through game based scenarios and practices. Through questioning, manipulation and conditioning of practices the coach can aid players in becoming accomplished in knowing what to look for, e.g. through the use of coloured bibs a coach can focus player attention to certain defensive patterns or the positioning of key players – it might be that it is advantageous for an attacking team to notice when defending wingers and fullback are involved at a TRM opening up the possibility of an attacking kick to exploit their absence in the defensive structure. As players become more experienced and skilled, time and space can be restricted thereby increasing the pressure on players. It will also become clear to the coach that if the players do not possess the necessary technical skills then progression has been too accelerated.

Coaches have a number of tools at their disposal in which to elicit the player responses that they deem to be appropriate to any given situation. Exercises and drills must have a relevance to game play. Training exercises may be adapted and conditioned in order to allow players to discover for themselves what works and what does not. This learning is then supported by feedback from coaches and players alike. For example, if an emphasis is placed upon ball retention then defenders can outnumber attackers, defenders may be allowed to play offside bringing extra uncertainty to the attackers, the physical parameters of the space maybe manipulated, targets and time limits can be set and other conditions, such as the number of players allowed to contest the ball, can be established.

Richard Shuttleworth (AIS) writes that manipulated practice will strengthen perception – action coupling, and through exaggeration of a problem, players can be guided to effective decisions and solutions.

Game planning, including patterns and sequences, can be established in order to manipulate opponents positioning in order to aid recognition and, therefore, speed up decision making. Players must be given the tools to enable them to recognize broad patterns and allow them to play 'what's in front' of them, for example, is the defence narrow or spread, do the attacking team have greater or lesser numbers than defenders, what is the positioning

of the opposition fullback, has the ball been well presented in contact, is primary support in place?

Video analysis can allow insight into what can be expected from an opponent in various situations and what the effectiveness of our own decision making is. Players can be involved in self evaluation of individual, unit and team decision making and generate further solutions to problems.

A factor which is sometimes overlooked is that of fatigue and its influence on decision making. Deliberately fatiguing players prior to a conditioned practice or scenario can be an effective way of exposing the effectiveness of decision making in a game context.

As coaches we also have to consider how skills are integrated together within a game context and are we allowing time to practice these links, e.g. transition from 1st phase to phase play? It is commonly accepted, that training organised in a random and variable manner, increases players ability to retain knowledge and link learning to game play. We must, though, be mindful that focus only on game like practice can reduce the time spent on individual skill practice and this is a crucial element to consider when constructing periodized training plans.

Finally, coaches must establish a learning environment that is non – threatening while at the same time challenging. Players must be confident in the knowledge that their input is going to be listened to and valued. All individuals have their own learning style and the best coaches present their ideas and thoughts in several mediums: verbal (instruct, question), visual (demonstrate), written (diagrams) and kinaesthetically ('feel'). It is of use to remember an old adage that:

- I hear, I forget
- I see, I remember
- I do, I understand

In conclusion, it is vital that as coaches we look to develop players that can interact effectively with the environment in which they play. To this end practice and training experiences must replicate game play as closely as possible.

Reading:

Psychological Dynamics of Sport. Gill 1986

Sport Psychology: concepts and applications. Cox 1994

Cognitive Psychology. Eysenck and Keane 1994.

Physical Education and Sport. Davis, Bull, Roscoe and Roscoe

Pierre Villepreux 1993 paper to Asian Pacific Congress

Lee Smith (IRB Regional Development Manager Oceania) "Spontaneity isn't Random" / "Counter Attack: Decision Making"

Richard Shuttleworth (Skill Acquisition Specialist AIS) "Decision Making in Team Sport"

David Hadfield "Understanding Decision Making in Rugby" (RFU Technical Journal paper)

Dr Damien Farrow "Reading the play in Team Sports" (RFU Technical Journal paper)

Joel Dunn "Coaching Decision Making in Rugby" (RFU Technical Journal paper)