

## **Developing Rugby Players Through an Empowering Approach to coaching**

New Zealand rugby can no longer assume that participation is high just because it is considered New Zealand's national game. Many alternative activities are becoming more attractive to individuals. If players' reasons for playing rugby are not met, they will tend to move away from the sport (Galvan, 2000). One of the best practices, underused as a means to decrease dropout rates, has been a recent trend involving players in the decision about the direction of their team. Kidman and Hadfield (2000) suggested that an empowering approach to coaching enhances player motivation, self-awareness and self-responsibility. Recent theoretical discussion has prevailed on the use of empowerment. Empowerment focuses on providing athletes with more choice and control (Kidman, Hadfield & Chu, 2000; Kidman, 2001).

This article is based on the trial of the empowerment approach to coaching. Co-coaches, as part of their philosophy, included players in the decision-making process for the direction/vision of an under 14 rugby team. The aim of the project was to determine if any parts of an empowerment approach that included Game Sense contributed to a successful season. At the beginning of the season, it was determined how the under 14 team preferred rugby to be coached and played. An end of season an evaluation was conducted. The players' reasons contributed to an understanding of how to keep them involved in the game longer.

### **A Shared Vision - Establishing Team Expectations and Consequences**

Prior to the season we determined the vision and values for the team by meeting with the players and asking three simple questions. The first was "what do you enjoy about rugby?" This was important to determine why they were playing. Their answers included, "being part of the team", "running with the ball", "tackling", "scoring tries", "playing well by giving it your best and meeting people".

It is worth noting that "winning" was not mentioned. The absence of winning as a reason for enjoying rugby is not uncommon amongst youth sport participants and dropouts (Brustad, 1993; Hodge & Zaharopoulos, 1991). It reinforced that, for players, there are more important intrinsic factors that motivate them to play and enjoy rugby, e.g. being part of a team. The reasons given by the players formed the basis of the team goals. The team chose to concentrate on doing what we did well that was in our control and winning became a secondary result of these performance goals and our 'vision'.

The second question posed to the players was, "what do you need to do to achieve the reasons for playing you have stated?" These answers formed team expectations and identified what we needed to do in order to meet our mutually established 'vision'. The players identified responses such as, "be committed to self-practice and teammates", "turn up to training on time", "hold no grudges", "use no put downs", "be a good listener" and "be willing to learn". These player driven team expectations were continued reminders of their agreed level of commitment during the season.

The final question posed was "what do you think should happen if the expectations are not upheld by players?" Essentially, this question asked for the consequences that the team would be prepared to live by (and we as coaches would carry out) should the expectations not be met. One of their answers was that players who did not meet team expectations would not go on the field ahead of others. By carrying out these athlete-owned consequences, the players indicated in the end of year evaluation that they appreciated our adherence to their consequences. It certainly reinforced the point that no player was bigger than the team and as a result the team environment was enhanced and discipline was easy to reinforce. Our experiences indicated that team discipline is increased as the players establish and take ownership of the expectations and consequences. For example, the players decided that they would be a reserve if they did not let the coaches know that they would not be at practice. The pressure was off the coaches to take a 'hard line'.

The players' comments reinforced their support for the collective process of establishing vision, expectations and consequences. Common responses from the evaluation included, "We found out exactly what we wanted out of this team and we worked towards them", "We set the rules and the consequences so it was fair to the whole team" and "it was a good idea because we knew as a team our goals and if someone did not turn up to training, they knew they had done wrong and were going to be benched".

### **Developing Moves with Players**

With our guidance as coaches, we empowered players to develop tactics and options to their game. Though coaches had ideas of tactics and skills, players were encouraged to think and solve problems. For example, the forwards were asked to develop lineout options together. The first instructions to the young players were "you need to set a lineout up so you can best win the ball". Initially, the players struggled as they were trying to lift a heavy lock. The same problem was put to them again. Through questioning, the players started to understand the concept and began experimenting with lighter players. It took time, but the trade off was immense. During games, we saw players use their

decision making ability to accommodate substitutions or change lineout options that were not working. This ability to make judgements under game pressure situations is a reflection of young players that are empowered. They have learned how to think for themselves, make decisions and adjust accordingly to game situations.

### **Player Rotation System**

As coaches, we believed that a player rotation system was better than selecting the 'best' fifteen. We believed that the benefits would strengthen our team game, as players developed an awareness of many positional requirements and gained greater self-belief in what they offered the team. When asked for their preference, they initially opted for the 'best fifteen'. Through guiding and re-directing (facilitating) players' answers, they soon chose a rotation system. The players quickly realised that the coaches' idea of the best 15 may not reflect their own and as a result their season could be spent sitting on the bench should they not make the starting team. Players' written evaluation comments clearly supported the rotation system. Examples of answers to the questions were, "Yes, everybody got a turn on the field and there were no grudges held in the team". "Yes, then everyone felt that they were a part of the team and had lots of fun", "Yes! It means that those that aren't able to make a starting 15 had the opportunity to develop their skills", "Yes, you can't leave 6 players on the sideline the whole game because they'll more than likely leave the team". The rotation system certainly strengthened team unity, belief in oneself and each other and team commitment.

### **Positional Play**

For the rotation system to work, we needed to develop players with the confidence and skills to play in more than one position. We believed it irresponsible to specialise a 14 year old into one position, as this is a major physical growing time in adolescents. Players supported the idea of developing their abilities to play in more than one position. The question asked was, "Explain whether it was a good idea that coaches tried to build your confidence to play in more than one position?" A typical sample of their comments included, "Yes, we might find a position that we have never played before and enjoy playing there", "Yes because when someone was away, someone could play in that position", "Yes, to help develop us as players" and "Yes, because then you have more opportunities".

The benefits of the rotation system were that combinations developed, players practised in different positions and contributed in more than one position at any time when required. Each player realised he had a valuable contribution to

make to the team's performance. Individual motivation and commitment to strive for the team (part of the mutual vision) increased. Coaches often say that all players have a valuable contribution to make to the team, but contradict themselves by keeping players on the sideline, often for several games at a time. How demotivating can that be to a player? One of the reasons young people play sport is to participate.

## **Game Sense**

Part of our empowerment process was to utilise the 'Game Sense' approach to coaching and learning (den Duyn, 1998; Thorpe, 2001). The use of 'Game Sense' activities was a key to players' development and rugby enjoyment. Having the players train within the context of a rugby game as encouraged through 'Game Sense' was beneficial to their understanding and performance of the game. The progress made by the players in their decision making skills, option taking, understanding of game tactics, motivation and appreciation of the positions around them was, at times, quite amazing to observe.

Generally, rugby players are involved in the game like activities because they enjoy playing it. We used Game Sense in this manner to enable the 'play' quality to be fostered and, as a result, motivation increased. We asked players what they thought of Game Sense, "[It] got us ready for the game, and [taught] us what to do in game-like situations", "It helped a range of skills with a range of games, e.g. kicking games, running attack, defense, etc", "It was a good idea because it was more like playing a game, so we were ready come Saturday", "It was like a game, plus it was fun" and "It was like a game and it wasn't just boring running and tackling".

## **Questioning**

Questioning is a part of the Game Sense and empowerment approach that is vital. As coaches, we are often tempted to automatically give players the answers. Effective questioning includes giving players time to process the question and come up with an answer. They are encouraged through this process to be engaged in learning. As a coach, there is often a predetermined answer to a question posed. The skill is to reach this answer by directing open-ended questions such as how, what, why, or where, to players. Players were asked to reflect on their feelings toward the use of questioning. At the start of the season they felt "Self conscious, was wondering what to say", "Alright, I was normally unsure of the answer", "It was a different way of coaching", "Worried" and "Puzzled often". However, this difficulty changed with more experience. By the end of the season, common responses included, "I realised that you weren't trying to put us down so I would answer more freely", "I felt

that it would make you think about things", "More relaxed, did not worry me as much" and "Good, because it helped me with my game".

### **Challenges to Empowerment and Game Sense**

There are a few minor difficulties faced with the use of empowerment and Game Sense. These included: time it took to problem solve, parents, expectations of traditional coaches and the players' previous coach. Empowerment is more time consuming because learning is achieved through getting players to solve problems and make decisions. The positives, such as player motivation, understanding of the game and long-term learning, far outweigh such a time problem.

For parents and players, most of what we were doing was new to them. Initially, players expected to be told what to do. Also, for many parents, the approach goes against what they understand as being 'good' rugby coaching. They expect coaches to be seen 'coaching' players, that is shouting orders and telling people what to do at practice and from the sideline.

Communication with players and parents is paramount. Keeping the players and parents well informed of your philosophy as coaches and aims (players and coaches) for the season, are vital. Part of this process included making the parents aware of the team vision developed by players. The meetings held, letters sent out and informal chats with parents, greatly assisted in their understanding of the season's purpose. We continually reinforced them when they were positive. In essence, we changed negative behaviours by reinforcing the positives and communicating to the parents.

### **Conclusion**

The players' input into the team's direction reminded us of the reasons individuals play rugby. Striving to achieve these reasons should be paramount for coaches if player participation, retention and player learning are to be increased. The success of the season was reinforced through player enjoyment, their learning and performances, commitment to the team and progress made. Without a doubt, these factors were achieved through the empowering techniques of establishing a shared vision, player driven expectations and consequences, rotation systems and Game Sense activities, with a questioning approach. The techniques certainly achieved great amounts of player and coach satisfaction and success. A secondary result of this success was the winning of the grade.

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