



**The Rugby League
Coach Education Programme**

The Think Coaching E-Link

Issue 13



Welcome to Issue 13 – Coach In Focus

Introduction

In this issue we take the opportunity to profile two of the games up and coming coaches Paul Cullen and Mike Forshaw of Warrington. Both represent the “New Wave” of British Coaches. They are highly committed, innovative and forward thinking. The interviews give you an insight into how they operate at Warrington.

ARTICLE 1

The Paul Cullen Interview

2005 has seen the Warrington Wolves emerge as Super Leagues big improvers. The games sleeping giants are now very much in contention for the games biggest prize of all.

At the helm is Paul Cullen who took over the club in somewhat difficult circumstances when their survival in Super League was a potential issue. Paul has quietly but surely set about building the Wolves into a formidable force and as such he is now widely regarded as one of the games top coaches.

In this interview Paul outlines the pathway he has taken in his coaching career, as well as an insight into his own coaching philosophy.

TC What influenced Paul Cullen to decide he wanted to become a coach?

PC *Brian Johnson was a big influence for me. We would both discuss the game at some length and how we believed it should be played. Brian was the full time coach at the club in those days and I worked at the club. This allowed me the opportunity to sit with Brian analysing videos and very much stimulated my interest in coaching. I realised very early on that there was more to Rugby League than I'd imagined, and that analytical approach helped me improve myself as a player, along with giving me an insight into the coaching process.*

TC Do you think these early experiences influenced your coaching philosophy?

PC *In some ways it did. But my philosophy is something that continues to develop. Every season, every game and every day things impact upon you that influence and shape your philosophy. For example as a player I was totally focused and committed – the classic over trainer in many ways. In some ways this impacted on my early coaching. Nowadays I'm much more comfortable in being a bit more laid back and delegating pieces of preparation.*

Don't get me wrong though Paul Cullen will always be totally committed and a fierce competitor.

TC What was your first coaching appointment and how did that come about?

PC *It all happened very quickly really. The day after the surgeon told me my playing career was over Alex Murphy called me in and told me I was to become the Alliance team coach. So in retrospect I was very much thrown in at the deep end. It was a case of you've got a session tonight, go out and get on with it.*

TC Based upon that experience has that influenced you in how you have structured the coaching set up currently with the Wolves?

PC *Absolutely, I consider the Wolves to have a very progressive set up with a clear structure from the Academy upwards. Most of our staff are educated to degree standard or are working in education. We still in my opinion have a way to go but our coaches development is crucial to our player development.*

TC You moved to Whitehaven for your first Head Coaches position. Looking back what did you gain from that experience?

PC *The move to Whitehaven was a big one, but a deliberate decision. I'd worked myself into a cul-de-sac at Warrington and needed to shake myself out of my own comfort zone. I'd been at Warrington for twenty years and needed a fresh challenge. I was lucky to find people of a similar mindset at Whitehaven. They had and still have ambition and that suited me and my time up there was a very positive experience.*



TC Your return to Warrington came at a time when the club was struggling, how did you set out changing things around?

PC *Initially I was very hands on and wanted to establish a work ethic about the place. I know we now have that and as I mentioned before responsibilities are shared with other members of the coaching team. I think I'm smart enough to realise that you can't be king of every castle, the job is simply too big for that. It's very pleasing to have quality staff that enjoys that responsibility, and more importantly deliver the goods.*

TC In terms of your working week, how do you go about preparing the team for a big game?

PC *With all the lessons I've learned my start point is "Recovery, Rest and Energy Levels". It's no good putting together an intensive weeks training if the players energy levels are low. I have very much come to believe in "The Law of Diminishing Returns". It can most certainly be the more you put in the less you get back. I think the trick is to be able to get the balance right with your weekly preparation. We don't want to leave a good performance on the training pitch or in the gym.
Likewise we don't want to leave it in the video room. Too much time in there can lead to paralysis by analysis.*

TC How do you cope with the pressure that comes with being a Super League Head Coach?

PC *Very simply by making sure I enjoy every day, especially the bad ones. If you can't do that then you're done for. I'll give you an example. The Salford game on Good Friday was our worst performance of the season. Every man and his dog rounded on me. Well, I actually enjoyed defending myself and working out what went wrong and how to fix it. Rugby League is great in that even after a performance like the one at Salford you do get the chance to put things right the following week.*

TC What are your long term goals and aspirations?

PC *My total focus is on winning with Warrington and I would be foolish to look beyond that. If I wished to coach internationally or in the NRL then I would need to have a track record of success at Warrington. Therefore I'm looking no further than Warrington Wolves winning some silverware.*

ARTICLE 2

The Mike Forshaw Interview

Mike Forshaw was one of the best players of his generation. Highly regarded by his fellow professionals undoubtedly he was also a key player in the rise of the Bradford Bulls.

After ending his career with Warrington Wolves he accepted a position within the RFL to become their sports Lifestyle Manager. It also came as a surprise to many to see Mike leave the RFL after a short tenure to join the Wolves as Defence Coach. In this interview Mike gives an insight into his new position.

TC What influenced you to take a coaching job at Warrington and leave a secure administration job with the RFL?

MF *When I retired from playing I was fortunate to be offered a job at the RFL and I viewed it as a great opportunity to develop new skills. I did however still keep in touch with the technical defensive sessions.
So when Paul offered me the opportunity to go full time I didn't hesitate. Warrington is a club that is moving forward and has a bright future. The chance to be part of that was something I couldn't turn down.*

TC How did the role of Defensive Coach come about?

MF *Defence has always been something that I have been particularly interested in and my role is just an extension of the work I had done previously. In my conversations with Paul Cullen it became clear that he believed that I have the necessary skills set and knowledge to help improve the team in this area.*

TC Do you see other clubs following Warrington's lead in employing specialist defensive coaches?

MF *To a degree I think it is probably already happened. James Lowes and Brian McDermott I'm sure input greatly to the defensive preparation at Salford and Leeds. It's something I can see becoming even more prevalent in the future. Defence is crucial to any team's success.*



TC What specifically does your role involve on a weekly basis?

MF *We have a 30 metre square matted area at Warrington and early in the week we use it for all our "combat" activities. These will include groundwork and wrestling practices. I must stress that is Rugby League wrestling with the emphasis on leverage and body position to win the collision. We also work on exercises that involve ropes and medicine balls. Shield work involving second effort follows this and as the week progresses we look more at our structure and how it relates to this weeks opposition.*

TC What do you believe is the most important part of defensive preparation?

MF *Without doubt the ruck – the floor. Lose this area and you are going to struggle. St Helens are a prime example of this. If you don't dominate the ruck defensively against them and they get a roll on, then it's time to fasten your seat belts.
I can't stress enough how important this area is. Players need to be in the best position possible on contact. They need to hit, stick and make that second effort in order win the floor and be up and alive at marker.*

TC How have the players responded to your ideas and philosophy on defence?

MF *I think it would be fair to say that some may have been a little apprehensive at first with some of the combat drills and games. I do believe they are all committed to improve though and as coach my job is to stimulate and challenge them to make that improvement.*

TC Having been involved in the game at the very highest level do you think there are any differences between British and Australian players in terms of defensive capabilities?

MF *Paul and myself visited Australia recently and took in a number of games. To be perfectly honest I believe there is a big myth around Australian players. Generally speaking they are no better than our players. They do the same things that we do in terms of preparation. The only difference is that they have several players who on the international stage offensively have that X-factor.*

TC How do you see the game developing defensively?

MF *It's difficult to say really but it will obviously be influenced by how the game evolves offensively. What I do believe will happen is that coaches will work harder and harder on that part of the game.*

TC What are your long term goals?

MF *I'm looking no further forward than developing my role at Warrington and becoming the best defence and conditioning coach that I can be. I have no ambitions to be a head coach, and it's not something that interests me. I know my strengths and I just want to work in that area. In doing that I hope to contribute to making Warrington a real force within Rugby League.*

The Rugby League Coaching Magazine website has a wide variety of products that are useful for coaches. They can be contacted via this link <http://www.rlcm.com.au/home.htm>

Have the issues raised in these articles been of any use to you?
Would you like to see further articles on the subject?

Drop us a line at haydn.walker@rfl.uk.com

The Think Coaching Rugby League E-Link magazine is copyright to the Rugby League Coach Education Programme. The information contained within this candidate resource is collated from sources believed to be reliable and accurate.

Please note that the Rugby Football League, for any personal opinion stated or inferred within this newsletter, accepts no liability.