



**The Rugby League  
Coach Education Programme**

**The Think Coaching E-Link**

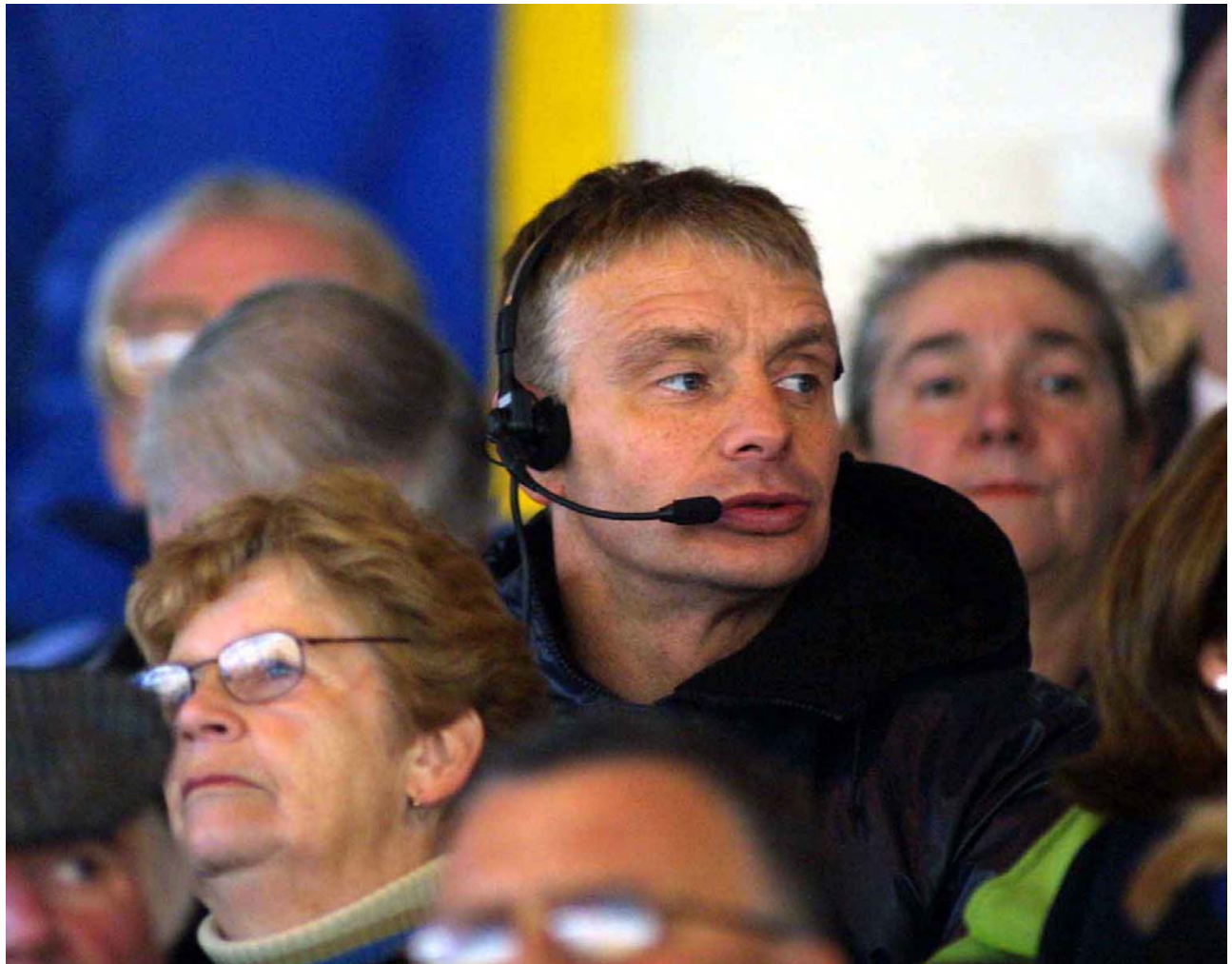
**Issue 18**

### **Introduction**

This issue looks at the role of the coach on game day. Article one looks at the coaches role and responsibilities at half time. In article two Parramatta coach Brian Smith looks at the broader issues of coaching from the sideline.

### **Coach Development**

Since our last issue the RLCEP has successfully hosted the first ever Cumbrian Coaching Conference at St Bees in Whitehaven. Over fifty coaches from the region attended with key deliverers on the day being Ray Unsworth and Dave Elliott.



# The Coaches Half Time Talk

By Kurt Wrigley

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Rugby League, unlike other sports, has only one official break where the team can be addressed collectively during the game – at halftime. The coach has to ensure that this small window of time is used effectively to either consolidate or try to change certain aspects of the game. It can be of vital importance to the success of the team that the coaches message is transferred clearly and concisely.

Over the years observation of coaches at different levels has resulted in the following phases being identified.

## 1. Preparation

- If a dressing room is not available, find somewhere in the shade away from the sideline.
- Stand where there is nothing going on the background – crowd, sun, kids kicking footy
- If there is a dressing room, clear other teams and players.
- Have ancillary things done first, eg drinks, injuries attended, wet towels, tape.
- Clear the room of people not needed so there are few distractions – parents, trainers, gear people
- Ensure you have the attention of all players – make eye contact.
- Squat down closer to eye level if they are sitting on the ground.
- Make short notes during the game (no more than 5) which can be referred to later.

## 2. Delivery

- Don't give too much information – players won't remember it
- Encourage players by emphasising both positives and negatives. Alternate your positive and negative comments, this is called the 'sandwich effect'.
- Avoid criticising an individual for poor play, have a short one on one talk before he returns to the field.
- Don't let all players talk at once, after you've made your points ask for comments from the captain or key players.
- Get acknowledgment from the players when you make your point – nodding of the head.
- Use change of voice tone and hand movements to emphasis a point – avoid yelling and screaming.
- Remain calm especially in pressure situations – if you don't appear in control your players won't.
- Be specific with the words you use. The speech is obviously the focal point of the half time break so try to avoid words and phrases, which are emotional and very ambiguous. Some examples encountered over the years include:

“Come on guys, lets dig deep!”

“Come on, Have a go!”

“What's going on out there?”

“Start playing smart”

“Let's get into the game”

“Our tackling is terrible”

“Let's get out there and play well”

Coaches will have heard these and similar phrases before. These statements might sound encouraging, but give the team no real useful feedback. Messages that are more useful are words/phrases that **Call to Action**. Some examples are included at the end of the article.

Half-time instructions that highlight a negative result can be delivered in a more positive way. Not mentioning the action you wish to avoid focusses the players' attention on the positive. For example,

everyone has heard a coach say, "Don't panic out there". Merely mentioning the word "Panic" can conjure thoughts of hysteria and lack of control. It would be better to say "Stay controlled and relax out there". In other words tell what to do or what action you are looking for NOT what they shouldn't do. As an exercise, think of a positive way of saying these negative instructions.

- No missed tackles
- Don't give them a sniff
- Don't be complacent
- Don't be lazy at marker
- Don't allow them to offload
- No bad passes

### 3. Summary

- Just before the players run out, the coach should reiterate the main points even more concisely
- Announce any changes for the 2<sup>nd</sup> half team – It is useful to read out all the positions to avoid confusion
- Speak to key players/captain individually on how they can improve the performance of the team
- Wish them good luck – remain positive and believe in the players.

This gives players specific instructions on **how** to fix a problem on the field, rather than letting the player discover it on their own. Examples of Call to Action words/phrases:

- “More support is needed – push up and be available”
- “Get more shoulder in your tackles – don't use your hands”
- “Markers get to your feet quickly and chase hard”
- “Keep attacking their right side its working well”
- “When we shift the ball, change the angles”
- “Think elbows and knees when we go forward”
- “Get more numbers in our tackles, get them on their backs for a slow play the ball”
- “Lock up the ball and stop their offloads”
- “We must complete our sets of six and then get a good kick in”
- “Be patient – if their defence is good get the ball in the ingoal for a repeat set”

Here, focus is on the process rather than the outcome. The process is how to actually perform the skill or the play, the outcome is playing well, scoring tries and winning. Concentrate on the things that the team does well, and which leads to scoring tries and winning. Things like marker defence, quick play the balls, building pressure by completing sets and good kicks, good solid tackles and a defensive system that works and everyone understands, etc.

Avoid using new words that players won't understand – use the words you use at training. At a higher level, teams use statistics to provide the coach and ultimately the players with feedback at half time like:

- Completion rate – 60%, 70%
  - Missed tackles
  - Number of Hit ups
  - Tackles, Offloads & many more.
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## ARTICLE 2

# Becoming a Better Bench Coach

By Brian Smith (Head Coach – Parramatta Eels)

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Arguably the greatest challenge for a Rugby League coach is the successful transition from training instructor to game-day director. While natural instinct and intuition play an important role in completing the step triumphantly, in-depth knowledge and a wealth of experience are over-riding factors.

Clearly some coaches do display an almost uncanny ability to ‘read’ a game, but for the main it is a predetermined system which allows them to make sound tactical decisions while under the massive pressure of a game-day situation. Without this background, months or even years of planning and preparation may be wasted because of a single error at a crucial stage in the game.

Brian Smith, coach of the Parramatta Eels and veteran of almost 400 first grade matches, believes game-day or ‘bench’ coaching can, on many occasions, make or break a team’s chances of victory.

”A lot of good work can be sadly and badly brought undone by poor decisions from the bench,” says Smith. ”While the coach’s input may not be as high as in other sports, it is an integral part of any successful Rugby League team. Due to the physical contact and the stress on players, there are far more variables for you to consider than in training, but at the same time the level of intervention is limited.”

“The most satisfying days you will ever experience as a coach are when your game plan goes exactly as it should. However, those days are few and far between and it is imperative that you have the ability to cope with any possible problems you might encounter.”

Smith is a firm advocate of training in conditions that simulate match situations. At Parramatta, both the NRL squad and First Division team train together in mock games that incorporate the majority of elements expected in a real match. These drills provide the players, and the coach, with a template to follow or modify depending on the relevant situation. A template allows the coach to focus on other factors such as individual match-ups and specific patterns of play, while giving the team a mental checklist to grade their progress as well.

”Reacting and adjusting to differing circumstances like injuries, sin-bins and weather conditions doesn’t just come naturally,” Smith reveals. ”Practising these situations at training allows you to react positively when they happen in a game. And when they do happen it allows you to gauge your approach and either adjust it or reinforce it before the next game. It is a continuous learning cycle. In the past I have followed games by a set routine, but now I prefer to be a lot less rigid. You need to establish a feel for the game and consider all your options when any variables arise. Of course with the advent of unlimited interchange, the number of variables has risen dramatically. Individual replacements may not be as critical as before, but the frequency and impact with which bench players rotate has certainly soared. The lateral thinking required to effectively and efficiently substitute players is only developed through a thorough understanding of the team’s direction and personal capabilities. At the precise moment of interchange the coaching staff must assess the amount of stress on the respective players, the amount of energy expelled, time needed for recovery, a suitable warm-up exercise and possible treatment for any injuries. All this without even considering tactical changes or specific instructions for the various players! Deciding which players man the bench is almost as difficult as choosing the correct time to interchange them. Versatility, temperament and fitness levels all play a role in selecting those not in the starting thirteen.”

“An injury to just one player may mean the entire team needs to be reshuffled or another player will figure in a significantly larger capacity than they have previously. Other issues to consider include the player’s level of nervousness, ability to control their nerves, and impact value.”

Rugby League is truly a 17-man game and just because a player is on the bench, it doesn’t mean he is worse than anybody who is starting,” Smith offers. “In most cases it means he has attributes that are best suited to entering the game later on. Last year Jason Smith was used off the bench and he was arguably the game’s best player at the time. It raised a few eyebrows, but it worked and shows that the 13 players that finish a close game are often more significant than the 13 that started it. “When I interchange my players I try to take them off before they make a mistake as opposed to after they do. It is difficult to pre-empt the action, but by watching the player away from the ball and reading his body language, your chances of making the right decision are increased.”

Smith, unlike the majority of coaches in the NRL, has switched from coaching in the stands to coaching on the bench. A number of factors encouraged him to return to ground level - most of all the personal interaction and eye contact that was not possible from afar. He believes the relationship between coach and player is far more trusting and understanding when they are seated together in the same environment, without the need for an intermediary. Smith also recognises the benefits of monitoring his team from an elevated position - namely distancing himself from any emotion and giving himself a better view of opposition weaknesses. However the coach of three grand final sides says no matter which position you choose, there is always an overriding need for clear and concise communication.

“Communication is the most important facet of coaching on the day of a game,” reveals Smith. “Use short, sharp instructions that emphasise the changes you are trying to implement. Simplify or repeat your message if needed, because if you lack clarity people are going to get sidetracked from what it is you want to achieve. You may have to access all sorts of information, including statistics, injury reports or player comments and you need to do it in the shortest time possible.”

A real game is a whirling, often chaotic ebb and flow of action with no ‘instant replays’, so the coach must note, interpret, react and preferably pre-empt continuous sequences of action while remaining focused and composed. Effective bench coaching is important because it can have an impact, both positive and negative, far beyond the extent of a single game. The challenge for the coach is to use every match as a learning experience and convert it into a tutorial for players at every opportunity that emerges.

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

Drop us a line at [haydn.walker@rfl.uk.com](mailto:haydn.walker@rfl.uk.com)

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